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A Strengths-Based Consultancy Approach in Elite Sport: Exploring Super-Strengths

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Abstract

There is a lack of literature documenting strengths-based approaches in sport psychology. This study explored how a super-strengths approach has been implemented by sport psychologists (*n*=7) and coaches (*n*=8), with UK elite athletes. Findings were categorized into three general dimensions: defining super-strengths, identification methods, and phases of development. Super-strengths were defined as a strategy for performance, utilizing a potential world's-best resource to gain a competitive edge. Identification methods were subjective (e.g., asking/observing athletes) and objective (e.g., performance analysis). Participants emphasized three development phases: preparation, adaptation and monitoring. Findings offer considerations for implementing a strengths-based approach and future research.

Key words: positive psychology, performance psychology, resources

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Over the last decade strengths-based approaches to consultancy, underpinned by principles of positive psychology, have featured heavily in research across mental health disciplines, including clinical psychology (e.g., Fluckiger & Grosse Holtforth, 2008), psychotherapy (e.g., Scheel, Davis, & Henderson, 2012), coaching psychology (e.g., Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011), and have been used for performance enhancement in organizational contexts (e.g., Clifton & Harter, 2003). Coinciding with this, there has been heightened interest in positive psychology (i.e., Wagstaff, Fletcher, & Hanton, 2012) and strengths-based approaches (i.e., Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011) within sport psychology. Building on this applied interest in the literature, the current research will explore a strengths-based approach to consultancy, termed super-strengths, that has been adopted by applied sport psychology practitioners working within elite sport, in the UK.

The increase in research on strengths-based approaches stemmed from the onset of the positive psychology movement in 1998 (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The purpose of positive psychology is to study and apply knowledge of positive traits and experiences, strengths, and optimal functioning (Seligman, 2002). Furthermore, the main concept that underpins positive psychology is that good health requires the presence of wellness and not simply the absence of illness. Therefore, in order to aid the improvement of a person's mental health, it is proposed that more attention should be paid to the positive aspects of their situation, moving away from the deficit-focused model of functioning that has traditionally been the primary approach adopted in mental health (Diener, 2003). Seligman (2002) encouraged the initiation of positive psychology and captured the need for the movement in this statement:

> Working in the medical model and looking solely for the salves to heal the wounds, we have misplaced much of our science and much of our training... by embracing the

> disease model of psychotherapy, we have lost our birthright as psychologists, a birthright that embraces both healing what is weak and nurturing what is strong. (p. 7)

In sport psychology, the predominant consultancy approach and subsequent methods adopted by practitioners tend to be underpinned by Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT; cf. Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2014). Although used for various positive means, the primary focus of CBT is to remediate negative thought disorders (Scheel et al., 2012) and develop an array of tools to fix these disorders, which signifies a problem-focused approach. With CBT having a major influence on sport psychologists' practice, it is understandable that some athletes and coaches still perceive sport psychology to be a discipline that supports problem athletes (Gee, 2010). Furthermore, a technique that is commonly facilitated by sport psychologists to assess athletes' needs is the performance profile (Butler & Hardy, 1992). Although both strengths and weaknesses are identified during this process, the intervention that follows, largely involves initiating training goals to improve athletes' weaker areas (Weston, Greenlees, & Thelwell, 2011; 2013). The assumption that weaknesses should predominantly be addressed to enhance performance is typical in sport, and training sessions are often designed around a focus on eradicating weaknesses, rather than enhancing strengths (Gordon, 2012). It is not proposed that sport psychology practitioners fail to adopt strengths-based methods in their practice, but there is little evidence to support this contention in the literature.

One study that explored a strengths-based approach in sport was conducted by Gordon and Gucciardi (2011). Primarily, this study focused on building mental toughness with cricketers, however a key aspect of the intervention involved integrating a strengths-based approach. Specifically, the cricketers' explored their own strengths within the team, and techniques from Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008) were used to elicit this information. In addition, principles from a strengths-development model (Realise2; Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener et al., 2010) were adopted as part of the

intervention process to help players identify how they could make their weaknesses less relevant. As noted, the main aim of the study was to introduce a strategy for building mental toughness, and therefore it was not possible to assess the role or impact that the strengths-based elements had in this study. Nonetheless, it was reported that participants were complimentary about the inclusion of discussions about their strengths, and the study offers some preliminary support for strengths-based approaches being used in sport psychology. The researchers also recommended that future research should explore the application of strengths-based approaches in sport.

Although documented evidence of strengths-based approaches in sport psychology literature are scant, this does not necessarily imply that in applied work, sport psychology practitioners are not implementing strengths-based interventions with clients. As suggested by Scheel et al. (2012), even when operating within a cognitive-behavioral framework of practice, where the primary emphasis is on the remediation of disorders, positive processes (e.g., reinforcement and support) can be offered by practitioners. Nonetheless, following a review of existing literature, it is clear that there is a lack of clarity on the implementation of strengths-based processes. It would be particularly beneficial for practitioners wishing to adopt strengths-based approaches in their practice, if a clearer agreement was established on how to optimize client strengths (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Scheel et al., 2012).

As practitioners often outpace research with their applied methods, it is common for them to adapt concepts and theories so they are locally applicable for the client they are working with (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). In sport psychology, it is evident that practitioners conduct novel interventions which may be informed by existing principles from the literature, but are adapted for the clients they are working with (i.e., Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011). However, as Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) suggested, it is necessary to explore these novel approaches and ensure that practice informs and is congruent with research:

> Practitioners can conduct novel interventions, based on a strong theoretical rationale, as long as adequate data are collected to test the effectiveness of these deviations from the literature... All data should be shared with the field to be evaluated for quality control and synthesized to inform existing theory and intervention. Work by practitioners in the field is an untapped resource for innovative developments and these guidelines provide an initial step for building a two-way stream. (p. 107)

With this in mind and due to the extremely limited research available on strengths-based approaches in sport, it is deemed necessary to study the methods used by sport psychologists in the field, to identify and develop a method for implementation. The present study explored a strengths-based consultancy approach, termed super-strengths, which has been developed and utilized by sport psychology practitioners working within elite sport in the UK. Super-strengths has received anecdotal support from elite athletes/coaches (i.e., Atherton, 2012) who have experienced the approach, and a case study of how super-strengths has been applied with various athletes was presented at a professional outlet (Bawden, 2012). However, as the approach has not been explored in research, the practice of super-strengths is not yet known. Thus, it is proposed that studying this area is relevant, timely and potentially important for enhancing knowledge of specific strengths-based approaches in our field (Tracy, 2010). The purposes of this study were three-fold: first, to explore the meaning of super-strengths; second to explore how super-strengths are identified; and finally to capture key phases for implementing the approach. It is anticipated that data generated will provide a conceptual pathway for implementing the approach in sport psychology consultancy.

Method

Participants

When designing the study, in line with Tracy's (2010) suggested criteria for excellent qualitative research, specific considerations were made. These considerations focused on

ensuring that the research was ethical, sincere, would have meaningful coherence and rich rigor, and thus make a significant contribution to the literature. The sample for this study comprised of sport psychology practitioners (n=7) and coaches (n=8) who had adopted a particular strengths-based approach in their practice (i.e., super-strengths). Participants were purposively sampled (Patton, 2002) for the most appropriate persons to be identified for the question being explored (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Sharp & Hodge, 2013; Tracy, 2010). The criteria for inclusion of coaches were that they had co-facilitated a super-strengths approach with a sport psychology practitioner, with the same intention (see practitioner criteria), in an elite sport environment. Consistent with previous research into elite sport, participants were world-class, competing at the highest possible international standard in their sport (e.g., Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007). Participants represented a range of sports, including field-hockey, rugby union, cricket, and sailing, and all were working with elite athletes at the time of data collection.

Procedure

Following institutional ethics approval, all participants were sent an information letter explaining the aims of the research and details of the procedure for data collection for participants, if they volunteered to be involved in the study. Informed consent was also sought prior to data collection and participants were reminded that all data will remain anonymous and confidential via the use of pseudonyms.

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, interviews were considered to be the most appropriate method of data collection (Tracy, 2010), because they allow for in-depth, rich accounts of an experience to be gathered (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). The interview guide developed for the study was informed by strengths-based intervention research in sport (i.e., Gordon & Gucciardi, 2011), and focused on enhancing knowledge within the following major areas: the concept (i.e., what is the meaning of super-strengths?), identification

methods (i.e., how do we identify super-strengths in practice?), and development of the approach (i.e., what are the key phases for implementation?). Prior to data collection a pilot interview was conducted with a sport psychologist who had previously used this strength-based approach in practice with athletes. This pilot interview ensured that questions were phrased in a manner that was understandable for participants and effective for eliciting information. It was evident from the pilot interview and from initial contact with participants that both coaches and practitioners were facilitators of the super-strengths approach and played similar roles. Thus, the three major areas were covered in the interview schedule for practitioners and coaches and all data were combined for analysis, rather than the two samples being analyzed separately. Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim; interviews lasted between 32 and 64 minutes (M_{mins}=38.81; SD=9.06).

Data Analysis

As knowledge of super-strengths practice in sport psychology is relatively unknown, a thematic content analysis was adopted for analyzing the data (cf. Côté, Samela, Baria, & Russell, 1993; Tracy, 2010). This analysis was deemed appropriate to capture the categorization of content emerging from the transcripts (i.e., displaying the main themes representing participants' perceptions) but also to understand the meaning of the participants' quotes as the organized thematic structure evolved (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2006). In accordance with the specific aims of the study, initial analysis involved raw data themes (i.e., quotes that represented a single, recognizable aspect of participants' views in relation to the process of using super-strengths in practice) being identified through a deductive process. Specifically, themes were placed into the three a-priori dimensions on the basis of content. The next stage involved coding the raw data (i.e., the meaningful units) by breaking it down and organizing it into meaningful categories that emerged inductively within each of the three dimensions. Following this process, categories were refined into broader themes,

with the identification of categories that were similar and those that were stand-alone. Higher-order and lower-order themes were generated from this process. As advocated by Côté et al. (1993), during the development and organizing of all categories, it was particularly important for the research team to discuss similarities and differences of the raw data themes to establish meaning.

As emphasised by Tracy (2010), qualitative researchers must consider the credibility of what they present to be true in their studies. Tracy suggested this can be achieved by four main methods: thick description, triangulation, multivocality and member reflections. In line with these suggestions, the present researchers engaged in analyst triangulation, employed a member checking procedure, and have provided thick description with direct quotes from multiple participants in the results. Analyst triangulation involved three researchers independently reading transcripts and making suggestions for the inclusion and removal of data or themes. This resulted in the change of descriptions of themes to better represent the concepts in the raw data, along with re-organization of higher and lower-order themes. To gain member reflections, participants were emailed a copy of their transcript and asked to provide comments regarding their views of the interview, and their experiences of the super-strengths approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). No additional comments were made.

Results

The analysis resulted in the generation of eight higher-order themes comprising 13 lower-order themes, representing the data set. Results are presented in three sections to reflect the general dimensions of the study. The first section includes data outlining the participants' understanding of the meaning of super-strengths. The second section concerns the methods employed by participants for the identification of super-strengths. The final section includes participants' understanding of how the approach is implemented and how super-strengths are developed. The number of participants who discussed each theme is included in parentheses

(see Figure 1). This is to display the prevalence of themes within the raw data, but does not signify superiority in the conceptual understanding that has been generated.

Defining Super-Strengths

To gain initial contextual knowledge of the super-strengths approach, participants were asked to discuss their views on the concept underpinning the approach and how they would use it within the context of their sport. During analysis it was evident that a clear definition was emerging from the consistency of language used by practitioners and coaches when discussing the concept of super-strengths. Thus, in order to capture the meaning of the data, a definition of super-strengths was generated from the raw data and subsequent themes: "A strategy for performance that utilises a potential world's best resource to gain a unique competitve edge in a performance context". The raw data, lower-order and higher-order themes that the definition emerged from are presented in Figure 1 and are detailed below.

Three higher-order and three lower-order themes were identified from the 18 raw data themes capturing the meaning of super-strengths. The higher-order themes were competitve edge (e.g., sets athletes apart from others), world's best potential resource (e.g., world-beating strengths) and strategy for performance which was broken down into three lower-order themes, default method (something athletes can rely on), impactful method (helps athletes win), and identifiable method (something people will know and fear athletes for).

Competitive edge. This higher order theme was discussed by all participants (*N*=15), suggesting that identifying super-strengths can give a performer an edge over their competitors. Participants proposed that the super-strengths approach is about "identifying what is going to make the biggest difference, what is going to give you the edge". Participants also suggested that the competitive edge is related to winning. As one participant noted:

> A strength is an area which you are good, you already have a high degree of competence, a super strength is your potential way to win, it's like we are finding a way to win, it's not about getting better at things (P1).

Unlocking world's best potential. The majority of participants (*n*=13) discussed that when working with athletes in elite sport, the super-strengths identified should have "the potential to be something they could become best in the world at". One participant stated:

> It very much starts with athlete/ coach agreeing on this is an area that you have the potential to be world's best. I think what is important at first is to try and remove the glass ceiling so the point at which people usually stop at, which is seen as pretty much impossible (P1).

Strategy for performance. Within this higher-order theme, participants talked about super-strengths being an identifiable method, so athletes would "have a weapon" where "this is my thing, my edge, this is the bit I am recognized for". One participant gave this example:

> They know it's different to anybody else, that's key. Malinga knows there is nobody else in world cricket that bowls like him, this is my thing, the bit I am recognised for, Usain Bolt his last 60m, if he is in the race in the last 60m you are screwed! (P3)

Another participant elaborated, suggesting that athletes' oppositions knowing them for their super-strength could be a way of generating fear in their opponent:

> It is your way to win but almost something that scares the opposition, that super-strength where they have to adapt to it, they can't ignore it, and straight away they take their mind off their method and all they are concerned about is stopping you. (P2)

Participants suggested that this method would also be one that they could rely on and go back to, which was categorized within a lower-order theme of default method. The lower-order theme impactful method was apparent from participants suggestions that super-

strengths is it's a strategy for maximum effect, "so they can impact games, matches, tournaments when crunch time comes essentially."

Identification of Super-Strengths

When asked about how they identified athletes' super-strengths, participants discussed an array of methods they had employed. These were categorized into two higher-order themes: subjective and objective methods of identification. Subjective methods encompassed three lower-order themes: athlete identification (e.g., questioning them), observations (e.g., in training and competition), and coach and others' (e.g., asking coach/team mates). Objective methods comprised two lower order themes: performance statistics (e.g., competition data) and formal strengths assessment measures (e.g., personality preference). The methods are detailed in Figure 2 and discussed in the following section.

Subjective methods of identification. Within this theme, participants cited several different ways they attempted to identify athletes' super-strengths. These varied somewhat across participants, usually due to the different settings within which the participants had used the approach. For example, one participant who worked with and employed the super-strengths approach in a team sport, identified that a key method was involving others and "getting team mates to identify each other's strengths" in order to gain an external, non-bias perspective. Whereas, another participant who worked predominantly one-to-one with athletes relied on the coaches' knowledge of the players' assets and resources in order to identify potential super-strengths. Another participant stressed the importance of utilizing the coaches for identification, rather than looking for an objective measure; they suggested that "you don't need a screening tool to tell you that, coaches have that information."

Observations were seen as a useful source of information in the identification process, and this was not limited to just the performance or training environment; participants highlighted the need to "gather resources" and take notice of the athlete as a person:

> You have to know the athletes and see them in different environments so in training and competition, and the team dynamics and the interactions with coaches… You are always looking out for it, it's not just in the sport there are loads of things it could come from (P3).

Objective methods of identification. Participants discussed methods of identifying super-strengths that were more objective in nature. Some participants believed this to be integral to the identification process but again, methods depended on the context in which the participants were working with. For one participant (working in rugby), gaining objective performance statistics to inform the discussion for identification was deemed to be crucial:

> You need an objective evaluation as well and I am really massive on this… you can subjectively know whether an athlete has done well or not but actually the data behind that is imperative, so we can actually look at the stats and say right his hit rate is this… so you get an understanding of well right in this game he was on fire. (P6)

Some participants favoured, or were better suited to, the adoption of quantitative methods of identification. For example, one coach cited his use of statistics and performance data in order to identify where an athlete was strongest and had most potential: "I do a lot of stats collection and that sort of thing… and Jennifer (pseudonym) completely revolutionized the way girls raced". The sport the participant worked with was predominantly a racing sport whereby statistics and data surrounding start, lap and race times were deemed to be highly important for identifying a level of performance and future race plans.

Generally, participants suggested their identification process included a mixture of methods and a process of triangulation, as highlighted by one participant:

> Performance profiling and identifying the different bits where they are strong, so again across the board, through talking with the coaches, through observations perhaps you pick them up yourself, through the athlete's ideas what is confidence

> enhancing for them and then I think it is looking for the themes across them and then you say right this is what we have got. (P4)

For example, in the racing sport mentioned above, an amalgamation of identification methods suggested that Jennifer's super-strength was to have potentially the world's fastest start. Upon identification, participants suggested the need for a "check point" to ensure that what has been identified, does indeed constitute a super-strength. Specifically, it was suggested that going back to the aforementioned definition and reflecting on the super-strength was important before moving on to the development of it. Examples of reflecting questions included, "does this give them a strategy to perform?", "could they potentially be best in the world at this?", and "will this give them an edge over their competitors?"

Phases of Development

Analysis of the data within the general dimension encompassing the implementation of the approach, revealed three key phases: preparation phase, application phase, and monitoring phase. All themes are presented in Figure 3 and key points are outlined below.

Preparation phase. This higher-order theme was generated by three lower-order themes. All participants emphasized the need to initially sell the approach to stakeholders and athletes to encourage buy-in, also to provide athletes with context for utilizing their super-strength(s), and ensure there is a strategic plan for change. Participants suggested a "sell" of the approach where the concept is presented to those involved (i.e., athletes, stakeholders, and people influencing the training environment) to initiate buy-in and ensure they understand the aim of the approach. One participant reflected:

> Well firstly you need to understand it, it's too easy to kind of be black and white in your thinking in that right I'm just going to focus on this and forget everything else, well no you're not you have still got to address areas of weakness so a good understanding of the philosophy behind it but also you have to be able to get people to

> buy in to this way of thinking and sell it so you have to be able to frame this idea and this re-framing idea effectively to key stakeholders like athlete, coach, Performance Director etc. (P2)

All participants highlighted the need for athletes to understand "when, where, how" their super-strength will give them a competitive edge. It was proposed that a coach, who must give license for the athlete to utilize their super-strengths without concern or "fear of failure", would provide this context. One participant explained the importance of this:

> Because points of difference are noticeable by definition and if people are playing with a fear of the consequences of getting it wrong, what will happen is they will lose their edge, everything becomes average or OK, or maybe good but nothing sticks out. When people truly have the freedom to do what they do best, their point of difference will shine… there is still a responsibility to make good decisions around that because it's not a case of play to your strengths and to hell with the consequences, this gives you a mental model of how you will do that. (P1)

Along with providing context for using super-strengths, it was suggested that a strategic plan for maximizing these should be developed with the athlete. One participant described an athlete's awareness of both context and strategy as being crucial for success:

> Putting an action plan into place and then working at it, reviewing it and improving it…how working on those super-strengths could relate to other weaknesses or those becoming evident or indeed how an overdone strength could become a weakness… the greater the athlete's awareness of this, the greater chances of success. (P5)

Application phase. All participants highlighted the need for adaptations to take place in order for the super-strengths approach to work optimally. This higher-order theme comprised of two lower-order themes describing the application to the culture (influencing stakeholders) and application to training (e.g., physical changes to athlete's training regime).

Several participants (*n*=11) suggested influencing key stakeholders in the sport is integral; "you need people who create the environment that the athlete performs or trains in because that is the bubble, and that's who decides which game we are playing." Methods for influencing and adapting this included "getting it into the language" to ensure people understand the aim.

The adaptations to training that participants discussed included "making the super-strength more robust" via "testing them on their super-strength in pressurized situations" and having "specialized super-strengths training sessions". One participant highlighted the need to agree training adaptations with the athlete and people who manipulate training:

> I think it needs to be clear how much time they are going to spend on this aspect of their performance and how they are going to do that. You know what are the processes that need to be manipulated or the contexts that need to be put in place to give them the best chance to develop the super-strength. (P7)

Specifically, one participant identified that their athlete's super strength was to be the strongest, fittest athlete in their sport and thus their plans for strength and conditioning changed to allow for this change in focus. Consequently, to develop this super-strength the athlete "used the fitness guys a lot more and got a lot more scientific with it" and "definitely had more precise plans as far as his fitness was concerned, as to what he would do when going through (sport specific competitions) and stuff".

Monitoring phase. This higher-order theme did not consist of any lower-order themes, however the raw data comprising the theme was deemed to be highly important in the development of the approach. All participants discussed a monitoring phase, specifically where "tracking where you are at" and "adapting and evolving" would take place.

Participants suggested that this monitoring phase must be constant and highlighted the need for "coaches to keep re-visiting the approach" to ensure the approach is successful.

Interestingly, participants noted that the phases of the approach are not necessarily temporal; i.e., that monitoring and checking "you have the right thing" does not come at the end of the intervention, but should take place throughout the application and preparation phases:

> Reviewing the super strength with the athlete has got to be quite a lot, so maybe every month you have a big review with the athlete and then every week you talk to them about how they are getting on and rather than just say 'we are doing a super strength session', we need to hear their feedback and make sure they are learning… We will review performance so if I know for example his opposition has made 4 direct errors [at the beginning of the year] then at the end of the year he has played him again and he has made 6/7 direct receive errors, well then I know that it's working. (P14)

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to gain an insight into how a novel strengths-based approach (super-strengths) is being used in elite sport, and to develop a conceptual pathway for understanding and implementing the approach. The definition yielded from the data suggests that super-strengths are identifiable as a unique resource or blend of resources that would provide an athlete with a strategy to gain a competitive edge in their performance context. This means that the super-strength identified will not necessarily be stable across contexts and may need adapting in different performance environments, which contrasts the usual definition adopted in strengths-based research. Typically, researchers exploring the use of strengths and resources for positive gains have adopted a trait personality definition, identifying strengths as something stable that a person naturally has and would thus apply across time and settings (e.g., Linley & Harrington, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, the Values Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS: Peterson & Seligman, 2004) which identifies a person's top five "signature strengths" is considered a trait inventory. Specifically, signature strengths are trait-like character strengths such as hope, honesty, and

fairness, and are taken from a list of 24 potential strengths. Although it is agreed that such strengths could be useful if applied in training and performance environments, the strengths identified by this tool are not context-specific and thus would not necessarily provide an athlete with a strategy to gain a competitive edge.

Conversely, while it is clear that there is a trait element of the resources utilized to identify an athlete's super-strength, the actual super-strength that is generated would be more state-like, depending on the sport/ position/ competition the athletes find themselves in. Specifically, the super-strength is part of an athlete's relevant strategy for performance which can be a unique amalgamation of their talents, traits and resources, and has the intention of providing them with a competitive edge in their performance context. For example in short-track speed skating an athlete's super-strength could be "to be the fastest starter in the world", but the talents and strengths underpinning this might be the athlete's aggressive nature (trait-character strength), their composed fast reaction (talent), and explosive power (physicality). However, in some races, leading from the front and having the best start may not provide the athlete with a competitive edge (i.e., in the endurance distances), thus there is a need for context and adaptation to ensure that the intended impact (i.e., gaining a competitive edge) is achievable.

Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) reinforced the idea that strengths are contextual and encouraged practitioners to consider "strengths development", which involves adopting a more sophisticated approach, by considering contextual elements and how to adapt strengths for maximal impact. Yet the researchers argued that the majority of practitioners adopting a strengths-based approach typically adopt "identify and use" approaches. Specifically, identify and use approaches include practitioners employing a formal strengths assessment to identify trait strengths (e.g., VIA) or talents (e.g., Gallup StrengthsFinder: Buckingham & Clifton,

2001) and then use the information to discuss ways the client might use these more in life or work. Biswas-Diener and colleagues discouraged such approaches, suggesting that "strengths development" would be more beneficial to clients, enabling them to better understand their strengths and how to implement them to greater effect. This notion has been reiterated in sport psychology and it has been suggested that helping athletes develop their unique, signature strengths could potentially help build robust sport-confidence (Beaumont, Maynard, & Butt, 2015).

Evidently, the Realise2 (Linley et al., 2010) has a strengths development element to it. The online questionnaire requires participants to rate 60 pre-determined attributes in relation to how energizing they find them, how good they are at them, and how often they use them. These attributes are then categorized into realised strengths, unrealised strengths, learned behaviors and weaknesses with an accompanying model to help participants maximize, marshal, moderate and minimize them, respectively. With regards to super-strengths, it is unlikely that the attributes used in the Realise2 online questionnaire would provide specific, contextual strengths relevant to an athlete's performance strategy; however the accompanying model does include strengths development considerations. Accordingly, Gordon and Gucciardi (2011) adopted such elements of the Realise2 model in their study described previously, with cricketers. Specifically they utilized the model's pathway for minimizing weaknesses, however they applied it to contextual attributes they had identified with the players, rather than the pre-determined attributes identified by the online tool.

Similarly, strengths development is evident within the phases of development reported in the present study which were considered crucial for implementation of the super-strengths approach. Within the phases of development, participants stressed the importance of providing the athlete with context for using their super-strengths. Specifically, building a

strategic plan around how the athlete's super-strength will look in competition and what the super-strength might look like overplayed and underplayed (i.e., if they use their super-strength too little or too often), a notion that has been discussed in strengths-based research in psychotherapy (Scheel et al., 2012) business psychology (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011) and coaching psychology. Understanding what the super-strength might look like overplayed and underplayed was deemed to be crucial in order for athletes to clarify what "optimal" use of their super-strength would look like. Participants suggested that coaches must be aware that sometimes athletes might not implement their super-strengths optimally, but must provide a "license" for them to have a go. This license involves agreement between athlete and coach on the boundaries around when, how and why they would use their super-strengths. It is suggested that the license offers clarity to athletes, would increase their buy-in to the approach, and reduce hesitance and fear of failure. Thus, ensuring that boundaries and a license for using super-strengths have been established and agreed is an important consideration for practitioners looking to implement the approach.

A further interesting finding was that the three key phases of development of the approach represent a cyclic process, rather than a linear process. It was suggested that monitoring should be conducted continually throughout the intervention to check that the super-strength is still applicable and would provide the performer with a competitive edge. If this was not the case, for example if the demands of the sport had changed, then in order to continue there would potentially need to be a re-identification process or a reiteration of the context for utilizing or strategic plan for maximizing their super-strength(s). The importance of monitoring the progression and effectiveness of intervention strategies is something that has been consistently cited as an important element of sport psychology practice (Andersen, Miles, Mahoney, & Robinson, 2002). Necessary adjustments should be made to ensure that athletes continually develop and that the intervention is best suited for the needs of their

situation (Murphy, 2012). This is an essential consideration for practitioners looking to adopt a super-strengths approach in practice to ensure it is most effective for the performer.

Another finding reinforced by participants was the necessity for the facilitators of the approach (coach and/or sport psychologist) to discuss with athletes where working on weaknesses would feature in their super-strengths plan. Although participants suggested that the intention is for weaknesses to become less relevant during the process of implementing super-strengths, they recognized that weaknesses cannot and should not be ignored. As proposed by Scheel et al. (2012) in their research in counselling psychology, there is a need to consider when and how to elicit and use client strengths in therapy, and when to attend to problems. Specifically, they suggested that if someone has a crisis problem a practitioner might need to manage some of the symptoms first, before moving onto how strengths could be used. Similarly, the participants in the present study stated that if an athlete has a significant weakness that could be noticed by a competitor, the athlete would need to address this before trying to utilize their super-strength in competition. However, participants discussed that the approach is to be used with athletes who are already operating at elite level, thus weaknesses tend to be less visible as most athletes should have developed competence in the elements of their sport. For this reason, participants suggested that the approach might not be applicable for athletes who were lower down the ability levels in the sporting system, as their weaknesses might be too significant and could potentially nullify their strengths. Likewise, Gordon and Gucciardi (2011) proposed that practitioners and coaches should consider the appropriateness of such interventions, depending on the age and ability level of performers. This has implications for coaches and practitioners wishing to adopt the approach with athletes in that there is a need for a pre-checklist, whereby practitioners have criteria for which athletes to use super-strengths with, to ensure that the approach is the most appropriate for the situation they are working in. For example, considering the athlete's level of

performance (i.e., do they actually have potential to become best in the world at something), and whether they have any major weaknesses that could be exploited by the opposition (i.e., that would nullify any super-strength). Future research is encouraged to explore the potential of adopting a similar strengths-based approach with athletes at other ability levels.

As an athlete's super-strength(s) are specific to them, the methods for identification of super-strengths that participants described were somewhat varied. However, all participants stated that they would ask athletes to identify their perceived greatest strength(s), and to discuss what they believe their unique qualities to be, in comparison to other athletes. Similarly, in their strengths-based intervention to develop mental toughness, Gordon and Gucciardi (2011) included questions for players including where they felt most comfortable, what they enjoyed most, and how they might be able to build upon these perceived strengths. Whilst questioning is a useful tool for eliciting information from athletes, other methods were described in the present study which could result in a more in-depth pool of resources from which to identify an athlete's super-strength, for example performance profiling and performance analysis. This mixed-method approach is somewhat unique to the strengths-based approach literature, because most studies employ a single character inventory, in order to identify clients' strengths (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011). To collate the information gathered from a mixed-method approach during super-strengths identification, it is proposed that an adapted version of a performance profile could be utilized (i.e., Hays, Thomas, Butt, & Maynard, 2010). The factors that feature on the profile could be informed by coach and athlete suggestions, and measures from performance data. This would allow for a visual representation of athletes' strengths and weaknesses and would facilitate the super-strengths identification process. Future research should explore how identification could be conducted when there are little or no objective data available or limited potential methods to employ.

Something that all participants discussed was the need to influence key stakeholders in the sport to get a super-strengths-based philosophy engrained into the culture. To do this, participants suggested the need to get coaches/sport-science staff on board and to try and make super-strengths a shared language across disciplines in the sport. The suggestion that sport psychologists' work is more impactful when reinforced in the system, by those who support the athlete (i.e., multi-disciplinary team, coaches, organizational decision-makers) has been reiterated in the sport psychology literature (e.g., Arnold & Sarkar, 2015). Findings of the present study highlighted an "adaptation to training" phase which might involve other disciplines. Ideally, within this phase, athletes' physical training plans would complement their super-strengths strategy, reinforcing this need for collaboration. For example, if an athlete's super-strength was to have the most aggressive, fastest start in a race, inevitably they would need the strength and conditioning coach to adapt their training program to target this area. Thus, the integration of the approach within the training environment and wider culture of the sport is something that should be considered by coaches and sport psychology practitioners looking to adopt a super-strengths approach in practice.

Applied Implications

As the aim of this study was to provide a pathway for understanding how super-strengths could be implemented in applied practice, there are several implications for practitioners wishing to implement the approach. First, those facilitating the approach should be mindful of the definition of super-strengths throughout. Specifically, facilitators should ensure that athletes identify super-strength(s) that could provide them with a unique competitive edge in their performance context. It is also necessary for practitioners to engage in a continual process of reflection and monitoring to ensure that they are achieving this desired effect. Second, practitioners and coaches should consider the phases of development outlined in this study, to get the most impact from a super-strengths intervention. Particularly,

agreeing with the athlete how they will maximize their super-strengths through adaptations to training, and providing a license/context for using super-strength(s) in performance are important elements. Finally, practitioners should aim to influence key stakeholders within the sport they are working in, particularly those who shape the athlete's training environment to achieve a shared-language and common understanding of the rationale and intended plan for super-strengths.

Limitations

Although the study has generated a conceptual pathway for understanding a novel strengths-based approach, there are limitations to be considered. First, it is important to consider the unique population of coaches and sport psychology practitioners that were interviewed in this study (i.e., working in elite sport). The ability level of athletes that applied sport psychologists engage with varies significantly from school level (Martin, 2005) through to Olympic champions (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Consequently, although generalizability is not the intention of qualitative research enquiries, the sample used in the study limits the possibility of generalizing the findings to other populations. The second limitation is the inclusion of the facilitators of a super-strengths approach in the sample, without the athletes who experienced the approach. It is necessary for future research to obtain athletes' views to gain an alternative perspective and their perceptions of the impact of the super-strengths approach. This research could inform our understanding about effective implementation, and help to maximize positive impact.

Concluding remarks

This study has facilitated an understanding of how super-strengths could be utilized in elite sport. The findings highlight various practical considerations for coaches and sport psychologists wishing to adopt the approach, particularly concerning gaining and maintaining engagement with the approach, methods to identify super-strengths, and the process for

maximizing and developing the approach. Following the suggestions from Gordon and Gucciardi (2011), this study intended to address a gap in the literature on strengths-based approaches in sport psychology and has provided an insight into a particularly novel approach being used in the field. Some findings from the present study are congruent with existing literature from other domains (i.e., clinical psychology, coaching psychology, organizational contexts) regarding the considerations to be made by those facilitating approaches that utilize clients' strengths. However, there are many unique elements to this approach and the elite sport population sampled and thus, it extends the knowledge from previous studies. With the lack of research in sport psychology on strengths-based approaches, and particularly the absence of a method for employing such approaches, the findings offer a new insight for sport psychologists and coaches working in elite sport.

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List of Figures

Figure 1: Themes representing the meaning of super-strengths.

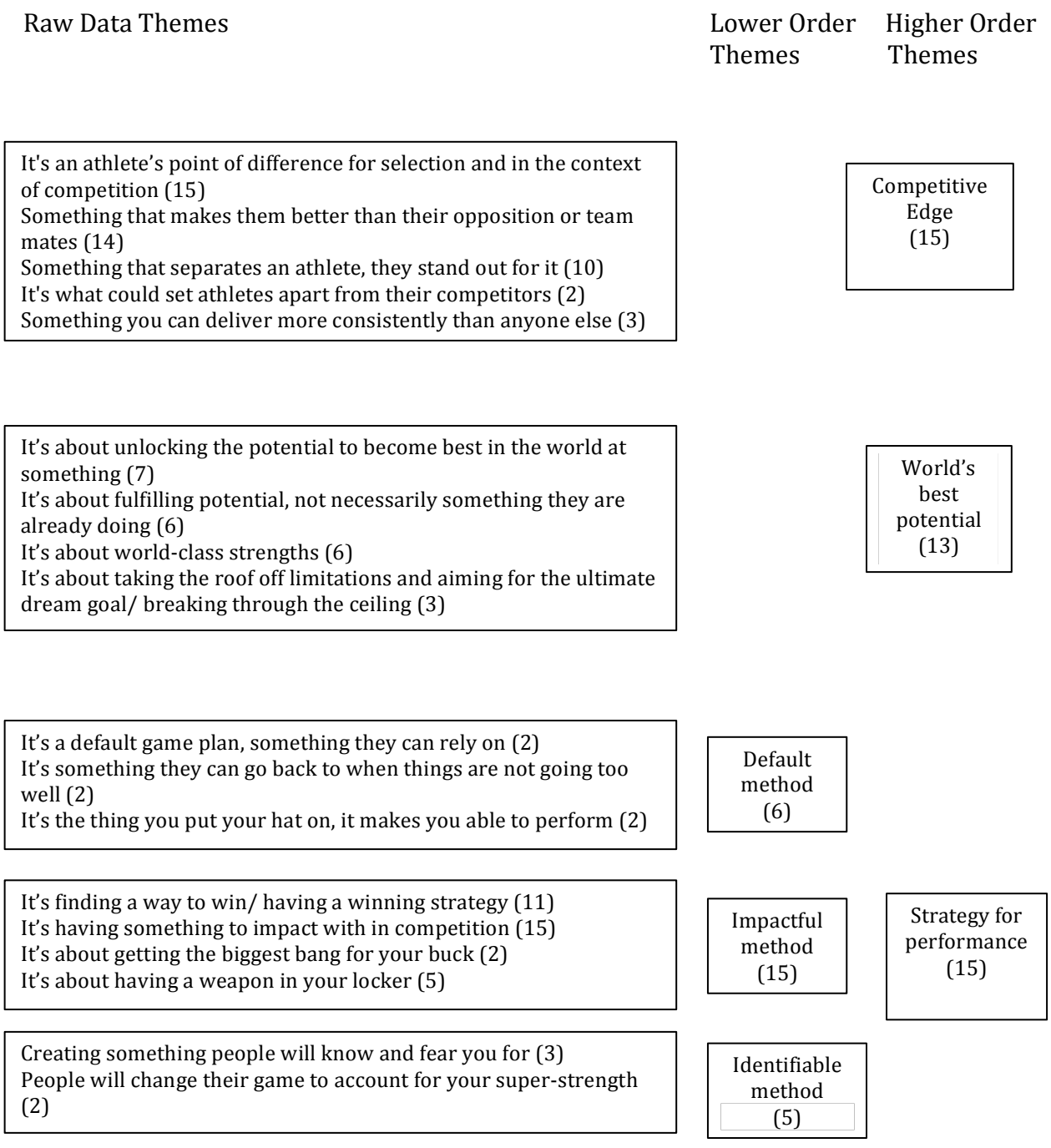

Figure 2: Themes representing the identification of super-strengths

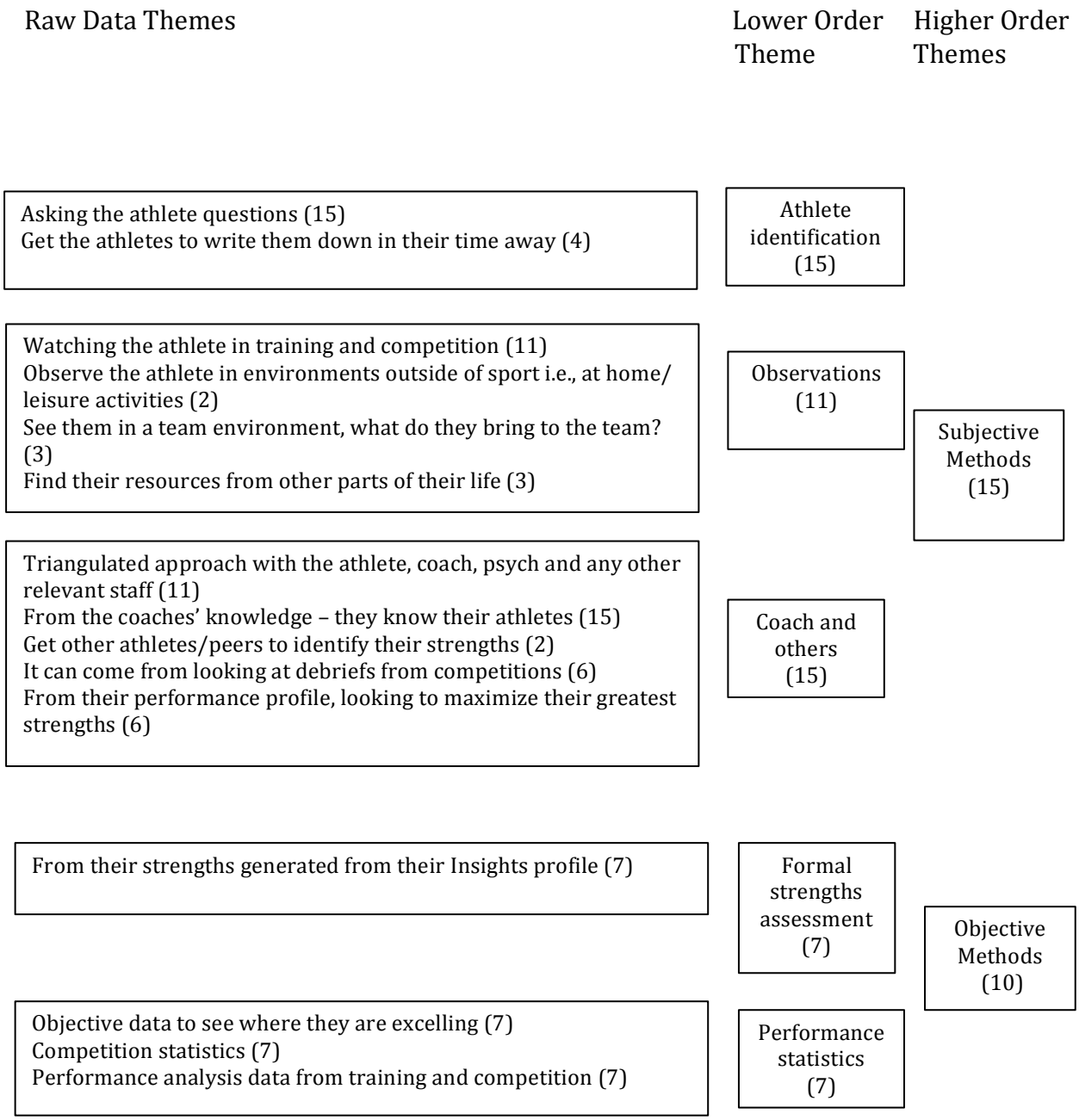

Figure 3: Themes representing super-strengths phases of development