

**A Systematic Review of Professional Identity in Sport Psychology**

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**Abstract**

The establishment of a strong professional identity (PI) among sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) has the potential to increase the likelihood of individual ethical working, awareness of professional roles, and ultimately, support of a more effective and lasting career. Nevertheless, there is currently no global consensus regarding a definition of sport psychology professional identity, which is imperative for ongoing advances in professional formation, training and practice. In this study, we conducted a systematic review of literature with the aim of developing an understanding of existing sport psychology professional identity knowledge. Following the PRISMA guidelines, we initially identified 4,393 research records, which we screened and assessed for eligibility reducing the sample of articles fitting our inclusion criteria to 25 manuscripts. We analyzed these articles by engaging in an inductive thematic analysis aimed at identifying patterns within the data and forming an organized, rich, and detailed description of the data. This analysis led to the development of four main themes: Formation of Professional Identity; Embodying Professional Identity; Influences on Professional Identity, and Challenges to Professional Identity. These data are discussed in terms of their implications for professional bodies and educational programs and their contribution to potential future research.

*Keywords:* Effective practice, Professional training, Professional development, Professional formation.

### **Professional Identity in Sport Psychology: A Qualitative Review of the Literature**

Since the 1890s, the field of sport psychology (SP) has gained increasing levels of visibility within the scholarly and professional communities of sport and exercise science and psychology; as well as in the media and in society (Kornspan & Quartiroli, 2017). Initially, this field developed as a sub discipline of sport and exercise science, but more recently sport psychology has experienced a shift toward a greater presence of psychological knowledge, theoretical frameworks, and perspectives (Tod et al., 2014). Associated with these developments, scholars have noted the growing number of professionals around the globe start engaging in applied SP practitioners, leading many educational and training pathways to focus on credentialization via accreditation, qualification and licensure (e.g., Cremades et al., 2014; Sly et al., 2019).

While much of the early SP professional development research reflected a primary focus on psychological phenomena in sport (Terry et al., 2021), more recently, SP professional literature better represented scholarly work focused on the interventions used by sport psychology practitioners and the psychological concepts that inform such delivery tools (Tod et al., 2017). Despite growing attention being devoted to the profession, Tod (2017) argued that the existing scholarly literature focused on sport psychology practitioners (SPPs) may provide the superficial idea of a clear profession, wherein practitioners offering applied psychology services introduce themselves using a variety of titles and credentials; presenting widely diverse educational and professional backgrounds. This range of professional qualification, titles, background, educational and training paths, may be the by-product not just of the variety of labels used to define the science and study of thoughts and behavior underlying human performance (e.g., exercise, sport, dance, music), but also to the complexity characterizing the legal, social, political, and contextual issues characterizing the world of sport (Cremades et al., 2014). This wide variety of professional requirements and training across countries, industries, and organizations can lead to professional confusion and lack of regulation in service provision, whether in sport or in other performance areas, which could lead to unethical, unprofessional, an ineffective service delivery.

65           The exploration of the characteristics of professionals delivering sport psychology services has a  
66 long history (e.g., Orlick & Partington, 1987), with researchers delineating the characteristics and  
67 qualities of an effective sport psychology practitioner from the perspectives of coaches, athletes and  
68 support staff (e.g., Chandler et al., 2014) as well as from the perspective of practitioners themselves  
69 (e.g., Cropley et al., 2010). Further, researchers have explored the career maturation process of SPPs  
70 with regards to changes in service delivery (e.g., McEwan et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2011), their  
71 engagement in learning activities facilitating professional growth (e.g., Hutter et al., 2017; Stambulova  
72 & Johnson, 2010), their professional philosophy and orientation (e.g., Collins et al., 2013;  
73 Poczwadowski et al., 2014) as well as the positive and effective long lasting career (e.g., Hings et al.,  
74 2019; Quartiroli et al., 2019a). While this body of work has helped to advance the identification of  
75 professional characteristics, as well as development and training knowledge, one topic that has received  
76 little research attention is that professional identity of these SPPs (Tod et al., 2017). Professional identity  
77 (PI) refers to practitioners' understanding of their roles, group memberships, and specific characteristics  
78 as sport psychologists, and is a cognitive structure helping them to successfully negotiate environmental  
79 demands to carve out a career in the profession (Tod et al., 2020). Further, drawing on postmodern and  
80 poststructuralist thought, professional identity is a social construction (Brunner, 2004; Burke & Stets,  
81 2009) that evolves across the career lifespan. Researchers in sport and exercise psychology may have  
82 not examined professional identity much because of the diverse backgrounds, training, education, and  
83 professional credentials that exist among practitioners. Despite various professional credentials,  
84 backgrounds, education, training and development pathways, and discipline specialisms around the  
85 world (cf. Cremades et al., 2014) and the decades-long debate about the nature of the profession (cf.  
86 Kornspan & Quartiroli, 2019), in recent years a renewed effort has been dedicated to identifying and  
87 raising awareness of a shared PI for the SP profession. To date, only a few studies have explicitly  
88 addressed SPPs' PI (see Portenga et al., 2017; Tod et al., 2017; Williams & Andersen, 2012). For

example, Portenga and colleagues (2017) attempted to define sport and performance psychology to create a core identity and sense of purpose among SPPs. Elsewhere, scholars (Tod et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020) have argued that the future of the SP profession depends on professionals clearly defining an identity for this profession. Despite these initial forays into the exploration of PI, this construct remains undefined and unconceptualized within SP. Nevertheless, PI has received some attention from scholars in other disciplines of psychology. For example, within counselling psychology and the counsellor education literature, scholars have aimed to define what PI is and how it develops among professionals (e.g., McLaughlin & Boettcher, 2009; Woo et al., 2014). In addition, in an attempt to support the development of the profession (Woo et al., 2014), scholars have also stressed the importance for trainees to develop a clear sense of identity prior to the completion of their graduate training programs (Hieber et al., 1992) and to explore how they identify with the profession (Gibson et al., 2010). Woo et al. (2014) concluded that the absence of a clear PI may lessen the ability of professionals to provide acceptable standards of ethical care. A clear PI has also been identified as a way to establish the profession alongside established professions (Woo et al., 2014), which might also be observed within the SP field regarding credentialing pathways (cf. Sly et al., 2019).

#### **Review aims**

Although different in their professional training and scope of practice, counselling and sport psychology professions also have several similarities including, but not limited to, commonality regarding phases of professional development (Tod, 2007). While some aspects of transference from one discipline of psychology might be possible, it would appear important to explore the PI of the SP profession to develop a distinct understanding of PI among SPPs. To the authors' best knowledge, no previous review of the literature focused on PI exists within the SP literature. Therefore, our aim was to systematically explore the current status of the SP literature and inductively understand how scholars have empirically approached PI. In doing so, we aim to provide a foundation for empirical work on PI in SPPs. The value

of this work lies in the importance of providing clarity to the public and to those we serve about the factors encompassed within the professional identity of SPPs, supporting training programs and educational pathway development and design, and informing professional credentialization. In turn, such clarity will enhance the ability of SPPs to provide acceptable standards of ethical care and help to establish and situate the sport psychology profession alongside other more established professions (cf. Woo et al., 2014).

## Methods

### Protocol

Throughout this systematic review we conformed to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al. 2015; see Figure 1).

*[Figure 1 near here]*

### Eligibility criteria

The criteria to include manuscripts in this systematic review were defined in accordance with the Cochrane guidelines for conducting systematic reviews (Higgins et al., 2019). The criteria for inclusion and exclusion were decided a priori and following the initial selection process of studies, three authors (AU1, AU2 and AU3) independently completed the eligibility assessment by screening the titles and abstracts. To be eligible, manuscripts had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) Language – published in English, (2) Population – accredited/qualified or in training to become accredited/certified SPPs, (3) Variables – focused on professional identity of SPPs, (4) Publication type – peer reviewed articles, thesis and dissertations, (5) Design – qualitative, quantitative and mixed method experimental designs were considered.

### Literature search strategy and information sources

Several strategies were used to identify peer reviewed published studies to be included in the review: (a) an online search of computerized databases such as Academic Search Ultimate, E-Journals,

137 Psychology of Behavioral Sciences, PsychINFO, PsychARTICLES, Open dissertation, Google Scholar,  
138 SportDiscus, PubMed and Web of science, (b) manual searching of discipline-specific journals, and (d) a  
139 manual review of reference lists of included studies for potentially relevant articles that could have been  
140 missed during the database search. The phrases used for the database search were: *Ethical considerations*,  
141 *Sport psychologist*, *Sport psychology*, *Sport psychology practitioner*, *Sport psychology*, *Professional*,  
142 *Consultant*, *Mental performance coach*, *Mental performance trainer*, *Mental coach*, *Performance coach*,  
143 *Performance psychologist*, *Mental trainer*, *Identity*, *Professional (Profession\*)*, *Development (Develop\*)*,  
144 *Maturity*, *Philosophy (Philosoph\*)*, *Professional Orientation*, *Values*, *Attitude*, *Professional Attitude*,  
145 *Attitude toward the profession*, *Professional Values*, *Knowledge*, *Knowledge of the profession*,  
146 *Professional knowledge*, *Professional role*, *Professional clarity*, *Professional activities*, *Professional*  
147 *behav\**, *Professional behave\**, *Professional practice*, *Service delivery*, *Ethics*, *Ethical consideration*.

#### 148 **Study selection**

149 All empirical research articles, theses, and dissertations focused on the variable of interest and  
150 written in English were included in the search. When the title and abstract of an article did not provide  
151 enough information to assess its relevance to the review, the complete article was obtained and read, to  
152 ensure that the paper met the primary inclusion criteria. Papers that did not empirically investigate  
153 variables relating to the PI of SPPs or did not include qualified/accredited SPPs within their sample were  
154 excluded from consideration in the review. Letters to the editor, commentaries, reflections, conference  
155 abstracts and literature reviews were excluded as not assessable and/or critically appraisable. Most studies  
156 excluded from the review based on the appraisal of titles and abstracts ( $n = 3,709$ ). A series of manuscripts  
157 were excluded based on the population of interest ( $n = 21$ ), the language of the manuscript ( $n = 2$ ), the  
158 main variable of interest ( $n = 85$ ), the type of publication ( $n = 11$ ), and other criteria ( $n = 25$ ).

#### 159 **Quality assessment**

We assessed qualitative reporting standards (see Table 1) using the tool developed by Lorenc et al. (2014; see also Hawker et al., 2002). This assessment process was based on nine questions aimed at assessing the relevance, appropriateness, rigor, and quality of the different aspects of each manuscript: (1) abstract and title, (2) Introduction and aims, (3) methods and data, (4) sampling, (5) Data analysis, (6) Ethics and bias, (7) Results, (8) Transferability and generalizability, and (9) Implication and usefulness. All manuscripts were scored from 1 (very poor) to 4 (very good) using a 4-point scale, leading to a potential score range of 9-36 points. In line with the Lorenc et al., each numerical manuscript score was then categorized as (A) high quality (scores between 30-36 points), (B) medium quality (24-29 points), or (C) low quality (9-24 points).

*[Table 1 near here]*

To promote good practice, we also completed a review of the included manuscripts using the qualitative Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) UK, n.d.). In Table 2 we indicate whether papers met individual CASP criteria. While most of the included manuscripts meet most of CASP criteria, several issues were detected. For example, authors provided a description of the appropriateness of their participants for the study in only 42% of the included papers and in only 17% was there a clear description of the recruitment process. Another issue we identified was that in less than half the included studies (42%), did authors critically examine their own role, potential bias and influence during the formulation of the research questions or provide descriptions of how the project was explained to the participants.

*[Table 2 near here]*

### **Data extraction and synthesis**

A qualitative synthesis was deemed the most appropriate method of assessment given that the modest number of studies ( $n = 24$ ) which met the inclusion criteria were qualitative in design. The 24 articles were subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) with the aim of analyzing and reporting



patterns within the data (Braun et al., 2016) and to form an organized and detailed description of them (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The RTA approach was deemed most appropriate as it provides great theoretical and paradigmatic flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the current study, the flexibility, alongside the time effective processes of RTA in comparison to other qualitative analysis tools (e.g., grounded theory, Braun & Clarke, 2021) were the two primary reasons why the RTA framework was employed to extract and analyze data. Following familiarization with the content of the manuscripts, potentially interesting features of the data were extracted to generate codes from the dataset. After reviewing the codes, grouping data into further themes, a thematic map was developed to be able to explore the alignment of themes and sub-themes. Finally, after further refinement of each theme, clear definitions and labels were created, and specific and compelling extracts were selected to relate the analysis back to the research questions and sport psychology literature.

Certain measures and processes were established in order to facilitate and ensure a rigorous analysis process. To best mitigate the effects of our backgrounds, biases and research intentions as authors in the analysis process, we, the first three authors, engaged in ongoing reflective exercises as a group and individuals, throughout the analysis process. Herein, we acted as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018; Levitt et al., 2018) to one another throughout the analysis process. We encouraged each other to openly challenge our preconceived notions of professional identity and our biases toward the research area as well acknowledge any existing formal hierarchies among us and the impact of these factors upon our analysis of data and final development of themes. Moreover, we also engaged in a series of additional processes to ensure the credibility and rigor of our review methodology. Specifically, we completed an assessment of qualitative reporting standards according to the guidelines developed by Lorenc et al. (2014) and a review of the included manuscripts using the qualitative CASP checklist (CASP) UK, n.d.).

*[Table 3 near here]*

## Results

The analysis of these studies led us to construe four main themes and a total of 18 related sub-themes. The main themes were: The formation of a Professional Identity; Embodying a Professional Identity; Influences on Professional Identity, and Challenges to Professional Identity. These themes are presented following a chronological narrative (see Table 4).

*[Table 4 near here]*

### Theme 1 - Formation of Professional Identity

The first theme relates the development of the PI of a practitioner and includes four sub-themes: (a) Training and educational pathways, (b) Developing competence and Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs) for practice, (c) Developing the role and purpose of a SPPs, and (d) The ‘self’ as a performer.

#### *Training and educational pathways*

Scholars concerned with the professional development of SPPs have indicated the influence of both training pathways and continuing education on the formation of their PI (Cropley et al., 2010; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; McEwan et al., 2019; Ploszay, 2003; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2009; Winter & Collins 2015). Based on our analysis it is possible to delineate how the educational and training journey of each practitioner represents the starting point for their exploration of their PI. It appears that practitioners see their training journey as the beginning of their professional development since it is during this process that they must typically explore and develop their professional philosophy and implementation style (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011). The influence of such training pathways on identity extended and changed throughout the practitioner’s career (Ploszay, 2003), with the experience of learning not occurring within a linear manner (McEwan et al., 2019). One of the key characteristics of this process was the SPPs’ need to learn from their own practice through reflection and their supervisors’ guidance (Cropley et al., 2010; Tod et al., 2009; Tod & Bond, 2010). Further, a theory-centric educational approach appeared at times to be inadequate to equip

232 SPPs with the skills required to successfully navigate the challenges of their profession (McCormick &  
233 Meijen, 2015; Winter & Collins, 2015).

234 ***Developing competence and KSAs***

235 Our analysis led us to identify the development of competence and KSAs relevant to the  
236 profession as one aspect of developing a PI (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Cropley et al., 2007; 2010; Friesen  
237 & Orlick, 2010; Hutter et al., 2017; Lindsay, 2007; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; McDougall et al., 2015;  
238 McEwan et al., 2019; Pack et al., 2014; Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011, Stambulova & Johnson,  
239 2010; Tod & Bond, 2010, Tod et al., 2009).

240 Cropley et al. (2010) and Pack et al. (2014) distinguished between SPP competence and  
241 theoretical knowledge, with the former reflecting the skill or ability to implement the latter ethically.  
242 Specifically, consultant effectiveness was also delineated as a SPPs' ability to apply and adapt their  
243 knowledge to a specific practice context and client (Pack et al., 2014). Elsewhere, scholars described  
244 how the primary opportunities for experimentation and reflection exist within SPP's interactions with  
245 their clients (Cropley et al., 2007; Tod & Bond, 2010). Much of this process occurs within the training  
246 phases of a SPP's career (Hutter et al., 2017; Stambulova & Johnson, 2010, Tod et al., 2009), unfolding  
247 through a process of trial-and-error learning whereby a SPP progresses toward an understanding of what  
248 works for them (Lindsey et al., 2007; Tod & Bond, 2010). Through an experiential approach to  
249 competency development, SPPs can use their service delivery experiences and subsequent reflections to  
250 develop a range of KSAs to be used across several dynamic contexts (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Friesen &  
251 Orlick, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015). As a result, SPPs can enhance their confidence and identity as  
252 competent caregivers (McEwan et al., 2019) and in doing so better recognize their limitations in applied  
253 settings (Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011).

254 ***Defining the role and purpose of a SPP***

In addition to the development of competence and KSAs, the provision of a clear definition concerning a SPP's role and purpose is facilitative to the formation of a PI (Cropley et al., 2010; Lindsay et al., 2007; Pack et al., 2014; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Tod et al., 2009). While several scholars debated the mechanisms of effective SP service delivery (Cropley et al., 2010; Simons & Andersen, 1995), limited attention has been put on developing a clear understanding of the purpose that a SPP serves. Through the reporting of SPP reflections and critical discussions of the profession, Lindsay et al. (2007) and Pack et al. (2014), highlighted the importance of identifying and exploring the fundamental core of SPPs work. These authors have explored questions such as "Who am I doing this for?" (Pack et al., 2014, p. 16) and considered how SPPs may reflect upon the most important aspects of their work and interactions with their clients (Lindsay et al. 2007). Finally, from the perspectives of experienced SPPs, Simons and Andersen (1995) summarized that the awareness of professional boundaries served to reinforce a SPPs' understanding of their purpose within applied settings.

### *The 'self' as a performer*

Across several publications, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of SPPs viewing themselves as performers (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Ploszay, 2003; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011; Williams & Andersen, 2012; Woodcock et al., 2008). To elaborate, Poczwardowski and Sherman (2011) noted that the delivery of SP services is a challenge in itself and can be viewed as performance. Scholars also discussed how SPPs work across various contexts with many different clients, all whilst occupying a myriad of roles (Williams & Andersen, 2012), which led experienced SPPs to feel like "more than a technician" (p. 522) within their role, identifying that "everything but pathology" (p. 522) was a topic of consultation (Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011). In facilitating SPP performance across a wide spectrum of service delivery contexts, Friesen & Orlick (2010) discussed the importance of a wide knowledge base and the flexibility to articulate several psychological approaches, as being key to optimal SPP performance. Elsewhere, it has been highlighted how the interpretation of athlete feedback

can affect levels of anxiety and confidence for the novice practitioner (Woodcock et al., 2008). As a performer, an SPP needs to be in control of these affective states in front of clients and to manage them to assure their effectiveness (Poczwardowski, 2019). Similarly, Ploszay (2003) argued that the SPP's performance, often measured in outcomes, is the key to gaining and retaining clientele. SPPs are required to deliver effective and competent services to clients in the face of a changing service delivery landscape while continuing to meet their clients' needs (Poczwardowski, 2019; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020). By identifying themselves as a performer, SPPs may better sustain their performances through the implementation of similar psychological techniques used with clients.

**Critical Summary.** These results are interpreted to align with the recent commentaries focused on PI within the SP context (e.g., Tod et al., 2020; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020). The development of key KSAs related to service delivery may help to formulate PI, particularly in trainees, whose professional development is influenced by their learning experiences in applied contexts (Tod & Bond, 2010; Hutter et al., 2017). While scholars have identified several competencies by which practitioner effectiveness can be measured (Cropley et al., 2010, Tod et al., 2020), as the profession continues to diversify and the contexts in which SPPs operate expand (see Sly et al., 2019; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020), so have the competencies by which SPPs might be measured. Therefore, while the development of SPP competence may form part of the formation of PI; there are still advances to be made by conceptualizing and operationalizing a shared PI (Portenga et al., 2017). Such advances may emerge from a better delineation of SPPs' roles and the necessary competencies they should possess (Portenga et al., 2017; Wagstaff & Quartiroli., 2020). It seems paramount that SPPs and those who they serve develop a better understanding of 'what' services a SPP can provide, 'why' they may be of benefit, and 'how' particular KSAs are used to assure their ethical and competent provision (Poczwardowski et al., 2011; Wagstaff & Quartiroli, 2020; Tod et al., 2020). This theme also shows the importance for SPPs to

identify themselves as ‘performers’ (Poczwardowski, 2019), focusing on their ability to effectively support those who they serve while taking care of themselves (Quartiroli et al., 2019b).

## **Theme 2. Embodying Professional Identity**

The second theme developed within this analysis relates to the ways in which a SPPI may be ‘lived’ and includes four sub-themes: (a) Immersion in the profession, (b) Demonstrating self-awareness, (c) Authenticity and congruence between philosophy and practice (d) Developing and maintaining a clear model of practice.

### ***Immersion in the profession***

Practitioners have described that by being immersive and purposefully active within the profession they can better embody their PI (Champ et al., 2020; McEwan et al., 2019; Ploszay, 2003; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2020). Indeed, this immersion was reported to occur through two mechanisms: enjoyment and critical moments. Enjoyment and satisfaction were derived from SPPs roles when they were able to operate competently as practitioners within environments that supported their values and service delivery styles (McEwan et al., 2019; Ploszay, 2003; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011). This identification was clear for one participant in Ploszay’s (2003) study who said “it’s something I have never gotten tired of doing. It’s been something that I have really loved. I guess that’s why I have stayed intimately involved for this long” (p. 65). Similarly, Poczwardowski and Sherman (2011) described how consultants reported immersion in the profession, often through full involvement with their clients, as a source of satisfaction with their profession role. Finally, McEwan et al. (2019) observed that concentrated periods of practice (e.g., training camps) provide opportunities to experience greater immersion in and increased opportunities for service delivery. Other scholars have described how critical moments served as professional experiences which occurred as a result of immersion in applied practice (Wadsworth et al., 2020; Champ et al., 2020). Such

moments provided opportunities for SPPs to challenge their standing assumptions and beliefs, leading them to shape a more congruent and aligned PI that is a reflective of their lived experiences.

### ***Demonstrating self-awareness***

Numerous scholars have reported how exhibiting self-awareness was salient for SPPs in embracing their PI (Collins et al., 2013; Cropley et al., 2007; Cropley et al., 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; McDougall et al., 2015; Pack et al., 2014; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Wadsworth et al., 2020). SPPs reported that increases in their self-awareness allowed them to have a better understanding of what was required of them to enhance their relationships with clients and the effectiveness of their applied practices (Cropley et al., 2007; Simons & Andersen, 1995). Based on these observations, two main ways to develop self-awareness were identified: reflective practice and exposure to various environments. Primarily, SPPs attributed increases in their self-awareness to their engagement in reflective practice (Collins et al., 2013; Cropley et al., 2010; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Pack et al., 2014;), within which SPPs reported developing an increased appreciation of their own thoughts, feeling and shortcomings, affording them clarity of their strengths and weaknesses as practitioners. Similarly, elaborating on the reflections of experienced SPPs, McDougall et al. (2015) reported the benefits that an exposure to various sporting environments had on the development of practitioner self-awareness. Importantly, both of these mechanisms for developing self-awareness require deliberate action from the practitioner and are not achieved passively.

### ***Congruence between philosophy and practice***

In addition to demonstrating self-awareness, our results also highlight the importance for SPPs to work toward congruence between their philosophical beliefs and their service delivery practices (Collins et al., 2013; Cropley et al., 2007; 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Lindsay et al., 2007; McCormack et al., 2015; McCormick & Meijen 2015; McDougall et al., 2015; Pack et al. 2014; Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2020). Exploring SPPs'

professional philosophy, Friesen and Orlick (2010) noted the perceived value of SPPs representing themselves authentically in providing holistic services. Indeed, when authentic with their clients SPPs are liberated to share their true thoughts and opinions ethically while also eliciting a sense of humility which helps in connecting with clients (McCormick & Meijen, 2015). Further, McDougall et al. (2015) described how practitioner's congruence was not stable, but rather constantly evolving and influenced by both internal and external factors, especially for trainees, whose development of a philosophy-practice congruence has been presented as an ongoing journey (Lindsay et al., 2007; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2011). The participants in Poczwardowski and Sherman's (2011) interview study highlighted the pivotal importance of a clear professional philosophy, describing it as the most important aspect of their practice and underpinning everything they do. Yet, SPPs must consistently and intentionally reflect on their assumptions to become aware of their values and beliefs (Cropley et al., 2007; Cropley et al., 2010; McCormack et al., 2015; Poczwardowski & Sherman, 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2020). In doing so practitioners are better able to align their philosophical beliefs and service delivery styles in pursuit of an authentic way of being.

### *A clear model of practice*

From our analysis, developing and maintaining a model of practice can support SPPs to embody a PI (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Lindsay et al., 2007; McCormack et al., 2015; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; McDougall et al., 2015; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2009; 2011). Scholars highlighted how the evolution of a clear model of practice is a process starting and primarily attended to early on in SPPs' careers (Simons & Andersen, 1995; Tod et al., 2009; 2011). Simons and Andersen (1995) described how a SPP may implement their reflections and service delivery experiences to guide the development of a model of practice which suits their values and beliefs. This development was exemplified by McCormack & Meijen (2015) who demonstrated the need for SPPs to regularly revisit their practice model and processes of practice through critical reflection and evaluation. Finally, a



clear model of practice will be rooted in a clear set of values and beliefs from which a SPP can flexibly develop interventions that will ethically and competently meet each client's need (Tod & Bond, 2010).

**Critical summary.** Our second theme reflects an internal focus on how SPPs may maintain their PI. This includes working toward congruence between practitioner philosophy and service delivery practices (Lindsay et al., 2007) and demonstrating self-awareness with regards to one's values, beliefs and practices as a SPP (Friesen & Orlick, 2010) within a clear model of practice (McCormick et al., 2015). These notions are also well documented within the counselling psychology, where scholars have identified that one aspect of successful professional development comes from congruence between a practitioners personal and professional values (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Moreover, counselling scholars have identified that engagement behaviors can serve to make a practitioner feel involved within a profession and facilitate a sense of professionalism (Woo et al., 2014).

Sport psychology scholars have described a process of individuation as a dynamic and continual process by which SPPs develop their PI (Champ et al., 2020; McEwan et al., 2019; Tod, 2017; Tod et al., 2020). Based on this process, an individual's PI is founded in the personalization of one's service-delivery experiences and aligned with professional values and beliefs (McEwan et al., 2019). Throughout the individuation process (Tod, 2017; McEwan et al., 2019), a SPP might begin to understand their philosophical viewpoints as they begin to reflect on their service delivery experiences and better understand the values and beliefs they hold regarding their practice. Subsequently, through a deliberate process of sensemaking, SPPs typically begin to articulate their PI as a result of alignment between their philosophical beliefs and service delivery styles. Finally, through the process of individuation, SPPs develop a self-awareness regarding the strengths associated with their PI, as well as the limitations by which they are constrained (Tod, 2017). It follows that this development of competence and identity as non-linear and intermittent in nature (McEwan et al., 2019). To summarize, this theme encapsulates the ways in which SPPs reportedly embrace and maintain their PI. As identified,

the processes of forming and embodying a PI are not linear with SPPs encountering supporting and inhibiting factors throughout their careers.

### **Theme 3. Supporting influences during the formation and embodiment of a Professional Identity**

The third theme relates to the influences which support PI and includes 4 sub-themes: (a) Peer support, (b) Supervisor support, (c) Lessons learned from other professionals, and (d) Reflection.

#### ***Peer support***

The presence of positive and adequate peer support can facilitate the SPPs' PI formation and embodiment (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Cropley et al., 2010; McCormack et al., 2015; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Pack et al., 2014; Stambulova & Johnson, 2010; Tod & Bond, 2010). Following the cessation of their formal training, and throughout their professional development SPPs used peer support to continue challenging their own assumptions, share experiences (McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Stambulova & Johnson, 2010; Tod & Bond, 2010) and process their emotional responses to challenging applied experiences (Pack et al., 2014). SPPs also spoke to the importance of using different peer support groups to cultivate a variety of perspectives to facilitate reflective practices (Cropley et al. 2010) and assist with emotional support and service delivery issues (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015). The value of peer support has been highlighted across SPPs' development, with experienced practitioners highlighting the importance of formal (e.g., counselling, formal peer groups) and informal (e.g., family, friends, informal peer groups) peer support toward their formation and embodiment of PI (McCormack et al., 2015).

#### ***Supervisor support***

As with other disciplines of psychology, the importance of ongoing supervision is apparent across the professional formulation and identity literature (Cropley et al., 2010; Hutter et al., 2017; McCormack et al., 2015; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Tod et al., 2009; Tod et al., 2011; Woodcock et al., 2008). Tod et al. (2011, p. 105) noted that "supervision gives you the insight into how to learn stuff from clients because it gives you the necessary self-evaluation, and also evaluation of skills and

questions and so forth”. Supervisor support was also reported as a valuable space in which to discuss casework or co-formulate intervention ideas (Tod et al., 2009; McCormack et al., 2015) as well as receive feedback (Woodcock et al., 2008), which can allow SPPs to become self-aware of their strengths and limitations as professionals. Elsewhere, Hutter et al. (2017) illustrated the contribution of supervision when discussing treatment plans, role confusion, ambiguity, and boundary issues. Other scholars have reported supervisors’ support to be useful for embedding reflective and critical practices within a professional framework (Cropley et al., 2010) and providing SPPs with a “central anchor point” (McCormick et al., 2015, p. 5) from which they can explore their philosophical assumptions, service delivery styles and personal values.

#### ***Lessons learned from other professions***

The value of learning from other psychology disciplines was evident across several SPPs’ reflections (Cropley et al., 2007; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; McEwan et al., 2019; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2009; Tod et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2020). Scholars have described how SPPs refer to conferences, professional development opportunities and specialized literature from other psychology disciplines to foster their awareness of existing gaps in their theoretical knowledge and applied skills (McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Tod & Bond, 2010). Indeed, Cropley et al. (2007) reported that drawing on paradigms and perspectives from other psychology disciplines were perceived by practitioners to be useful for understanding their philosophical orientation and beliefs. Moreover, professionals have noted how engaging in personal therapy allowed them to gain an appreciation for the ‘other side’ of service delivery, leading them to reflect on and implement new knowledge into their service delivery (Tod et al., 2009; 2011). Similarly, SPPs spoke of the influence that other helping professionals (e.g., clinical psychologists) and major events in their lives have in shaping them as a person and a practitioner (McEwan et al., 2019; Wadsworth et al., 2020).

#### ***Reflection***

Scholars highlighted the reflective practice as fundamental to developing their PI (Collins et al., 2013; Cropley et al., 2007; 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Hutter et al., 2017; Lindsay et al., 2007). McCormack & Meijen, 2015; Pack et al., 2014; Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011; Tod et al., 2009; Woodcock et al., 2008). Cropley et al. (2010) noted how reflective practice assists SPPs in appreciating the nuances and complexities of their work, particularly the grey areas of service delivery. Other scholars indicated how reflecting on their professional development can assist SPPs to identify their values (Collins et al., 2013; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Tod et al., 2009; Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011) as well as the philosophical beliefs and world views which underpin their practice (e.g., McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2007). Finally, through reflection, SPPs can also become more aware of how to articulate their philosophical views and develop a model of practice that is authentic (Cropley, 2007; Hutter et al., 2017; Pack et al., 2014).

**Critical summary.** Tod et al. (2020) presented three resources from which SPPs can grow their PI: relationships, reading and writing, specifically highlighting the value of relationships with peers, supervisors and clients in helping a SPP to reflect on their developmental journey. It is important to reinforce the importance of peers' and supervisors' support for SPP's professional development and the development of PI. Of particular importance is the provision of safe environments, which SPPs may use to reflect on their development with the guidance of supervisors and through experience sharing with peers (McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Pack et al., 2014). In their systematic review, Woo et al. (2017) identified how counselling supervisors contributed to the development of their supervisees' PI by conveying their own PI as a position from which to start. It is also important that SPPs do not limit their sources of support and reflection exclusively to the SP community and literature, and instead they find support and sources for self-reflection from other helping professionals and within other disciplines. In sum, this theme showcases the main influences reported to support the formation and maintenance of a SPPI. While such influences enhance the SPPI development process, many others inhibit this.

**Theme 4. Challenges regarding the formation and embodiment of a Professional Identity**

The fourth theme we developed focuses on the challenges to the formation and embodiment of PI and includes 4 sub-themes: (a) Anxiety and self-doubt, (b) Demands of the profession, (c) Experiencing multiple identities, and (d) Having naïve expectations of the profession.

***Anxiety and self-doubts***

As in other disciplines of psychology, SPPs encounter challenges to their PI due to anxiety and self-doubt regarding their effectiveness and competence as practitioners (Collins et al. 2013; Cropley et al., 2007; Lindsay et al., 2007; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2009; 2011; Williams & Andersen, 2012; Wadsworth et al., 2020; Woodcock et al., 2008). Often these challenges are manifest in self-critical questioning and uncertainty regarding ‘getting it right’ and replicating ‘clean’ textbook-style service provision (Tod et al., 2009; 2011; Tod & Bond, 2010; Wadsworth et al., 2020). Indeed, through frequent negative self-talk and doubt during applied practice (Williams & Andersen, 2012), SPPs often question their ability and service delivery style (Lindsay et al., 2007). Scholars have reported how SPPs create self-doubt by focusing on the weaknesses of their practice and limited consideration of their strengths which may provide them with confidence in their abilities (Collins et al., 2013; Woodcock et al., 2008). Indeed, SPPs often reported experiencing anxieties regarding client expectations and self-doubt associated with being unable to meet such expectations (Cropley et al., 2007).

***Demands of the profession***

SPPs face challenges to their PI due to the professional contexts in which they work (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Champ et al., 2020; Friesen & Orlick, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015; Pack et al., 2014; Ploszay, 2003; Simons & Andersen, 1995; Tod & Bond 2010; Tod et al., 2009; 2011). Some SPPs have described how the unconventional nature of the working conditions and settings in which they practice and the associated demands represent a major challenge to their professional journey (Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2011; McDougall et al., 2015). Moreover, the contextual constraints SPPs often face in

their practice seem to compromise their ability to provide effective and competent services, and in turn, also lead many to experience self-doubt about their own professional role (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; Simons & Andersen, 1995). Some of these demands were rooted in a perceived need to quickly and consistently meet stakeholders' expectations and the associated emotional burden of this labor, which can make the practice a lonely pursuit (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Pack et al., 2014; Ploszay, 2003). Champ et al. (2020) described the negative impact of working as the only female in a male dominated environment, leading her to "questioning every aspect of my identity" (Champ et al., 2020, p. 9). Finally, infrequent work and the value stakeholders have for the profession lead to financial threat for some SPPs, with some questioning the feasibility of their professional journey (Tod et al., 2009).

### *Experiencing multiple identities*

Within the practice environment, SPPs are often required to "muck in" and assume roles that are seemingly very different to what one might expect is the traditional work of a psychologist, leading them to experience multiple identities (Champ et al., 2020; Friesen and Orlick, 2010; McCormack et al., 2015; Williams & Andersen, 2012). The varied roles assumed by practitioners often lead to a blurring of the boundaries of SPPs practices, which is particularly prevalent during extensive periods of service delivery, such as competition, where the boundaries of the client-practitioner relationship are challenged (Williams & Andersen, 2012). The adoption of multiple identities can also lead to a sense of inauthentic and misaligned service delivery and the creation of context-driven personas, not reflecting the values and beliefs of the SPP (Friesen & Orlick, 2010). Champ et al. (2020) discussed how a desire to 'survive' within the sport as a female SPP in a male dominated context, led her to cultivate a version of herself to better align with the masculine identity of the environment, thus posing a challenge to the development of an authentic and aligned PI.

### *A naïve view of the profession*

The SPPs' pre-determined expectations of service delivery and their professional role presented another challenge to PI (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015; McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Tod & Bond, 2010; Tod et al., 2009). SPPs described how their perceptions of 'good' SPP were characterized by fast results and led them to seek immediate solutions (Tod et al., 2009) or quick fixes (Tod & Bond, 2011; McCormick & Meijen, 2015) for their clients. Scholars have also shown how SPPs are challenged by their need to prove their own professional worth and to embrace a 'rigid' – assumed to be effective – approach to service delivery (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015). SPPs also discussed how their desire to provide competent and comprehensive services, combined with a pre-conceptualized view of what a SPP is and does, often lead them to only engage in material that fit their preconceived notions of service delivery (McCormick & Meijen, 2015; Tod et al., 2009).

**Critical summary.** The SPPs' experience of unique professional challenges and demands associated with the profession are well documented. Scholars have described the challenges associated with the uniqueness of the profession (e.g., Collins et al., 2013; Ploszay, 2003; Stapleton et al., 2010), and how they can lead SPPs to experience emotional labor trying to fit within professional environments that do not always allow a full genuine expression of their own emotions (Hings et al., 2017). The prominent challenges to the formation and embodiment of a PI relate to issues of anxiety and self-doubt regarding SPPs' competencies, which are often rooted in a rigid view of what a SPP *is*, *should be*, and *does* (Arnold & Sarkar, 2015) and the way one *must* implement their services (Tod & Bond, 2010). Among trainee SPPs, service-delivery anxiety emanates from high levels of cognitive activity experienced early in their career and can be disruptive to internal processes (Tod, 2017). It is noteworthy that scholars across the psychology disciplines have often described such feelings as a part of practitioner development (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2003; Tod, 2007). These challenging experiences not only limit the formation and embodiment of the PI, but may jeopardize SPPs' entire professional

experience (Quartiroli et al., 2019a) and self-care (Quartiroli et al., 2019b). While these experiences do not necessarily lead to practitioner impairment they serve as valuable warnings (Barnett et al., 2007).

### Conclusion

In this review we aimed to examine and qualitatively analyze the available literature on PI. Until recently (see Eubank et al., 2021), professional identity was a construct that had received only sporadic and superficial attention within a siloed body of wide-ranging and disparate work. Hence, the integration of these lines of work here has allowed us to develop a rich understanding of the extant literature relevant to PI which will provide a foundation for future research and practice. Indeed, one of the salient observations emanating from this review is the existence of a diverse body of scholarly work bringing to life a range of different elements encompassed in the PI construct. Nevertheless, these elements hitherto collectively lacked conceptual connection or coherent integration among regarding a unifying SPPI. Such processes have already been explored by the counselling profession and unfolded with the premise of a “unity through diversity” (Woo et al., 2014, p. 2).

With this systematic review we have identified and connected disparate lines of research from which scholars might develop a conceptual framework, definition, and characterization of SPPI. Importantly, in this review, we have been able to highlight the strong connections between factors underlying the identity of professionals, which in turn, has been noted as being fundamental to both educational pathways and applied practice (Tod et al., 2017). Concurrently, we have highlighted how some of the challenges highlighted in the literature as obstacles to the “how to” of the profession also appear to limit SPPs’ ability to explore and define their own PI. Our synthesis of the available research on PI characterization, formation and maintenance significantly advances knowledge in this area, and yet, to further support the future of the profession and clearly delineate of work of SPPs, in addition to this first description of the factors encompassed within the professional identity of SPPs, ongoing work is needed toward the development of a commonly shared definition of a SPPI (Wagstaff & Quartiroli,



2020). This line of work can have a substantial impact on the future development of professionals and educational pathways. Sport psychologists are performers in their own right (Poczwardoski, 2019), and hence, it is important to understand what the profession *is*, who SPPs *are* as professionals, and *how they fit* within the profession, to perform at their best. With this systematic review, we have provided an initial integration of PI-relevant literature, which will be a fundamental cornerstone to support such development of professionals as well as theoretical frameworks within this area.

### **Applied Implications**

Despite the nascent stage of this research, several prospective training and development opportunities exist. To elaborate, SP professional societies might develop and disseminate resources for professionals that develop an awareness of PI and offer opportunities for trainee and early career professionals to build a professional network by connecting them with other professionals and use this network to facilitate reflection on their professional identity with others. This might serve to provide support during an individual's professional formation while also connecting them to a network of fellow practitioners who are also developing their own PI. In time, this network will develop and foster a shared understanding of the profession. Further, membership to a professional society may allow for a greater sense of professionalism and allegiance to the profession, offering greater opportunities to be immersive in professional behaviors such as networking, continuing education, and mentoring.

The present study highlights the importance of professionalized education and training programs for supporting trainees and early career SPPs given the early formation of their own SPPI. To elaborate, structured professional pathways to practice that offer a critical stimulation and ultimately a greater understanding of one's SPPI will enable early career SPPs to better situate themselves professionally among peers and other healthcare professionals. Hence, the professionalization of education and training programs may help SPPs to develop their own SPPI, and in turn, understanding of their professional roles regarding 'what' services they can provide, 'why' they may be of benefit, and 'how' particular

587 knowledge, skills, and abilities might promote ethical and competent practice. These programs may also  
588 support SPPs to identify their values and beliefs and the likelihood of congruence of their personal and  
589 professional self via engagement with peers, supervisors, and professional organizations. As part of this  
590 developmental process, supervisors may be able to support their students' and trainees' development by  
591 sharing their own SPPI and developmental experiences. Finally, such programs might support early  
592 career SPPs to remain open to and accepting of experiences of anxiety and self-doubt that typically  
593 characterizes the nascent SPPs' professional journey. By better preparing and supporting neophyte SPPs  
594 to meaningfully "sit with" these experiences, encouraging them to engaging with the body of literature  
595 detailing personal reflections on such experiences, and sharing personal experiences, we might better  
596 support early career SPPs with a foundation to develop their own sense of self in the profession.

597 While the themes developed here will help scholars to take stock of the existing knowledge  
598 regarding practitioners' PI, several opportunities exist to expand this knowledge through programs of  
599 research. For example, it would be valuable for researchers to explore how practitioners develop,  
600 sustain, and experience their PI over the course of their careers and whether there are common  
601 milestones or narratives shared during this formation. Researchers might also adapt and better integrate  
602 knowledge from other psychology disciplines relating to PI (e.g., Woo et al., 2014) when developing  
603 SPP resources.

604 In this review we provide a sense of the developmental nature of SPPI while also illuminating  
605 how PI is grounded in the competencies needed to practice, the development of philosophical beliefs and  
606 values as well as experiences through involvement in the profession. Concurrently, we have highlighted  
607 how some of the developmental challenges highlighted in the literature as obstacles to service delivery  
608 may also limit the ability of the SPPs to explore and define their own PI.

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