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**Feddersen, NB, Champ, F, Sæther, SA and Littlewood, M (2022)
Confidentiality and surveillance challenges for psychologists working in men's football academies in England. Journal of Applied Sport Psychology. ISSN 1041-3200**

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To cite this article: Niels Boysen Feddersen, Francesca Champ, Stig Arve Sæther & Martin Littlewood (2022): Confidentiality and surveillance challenges for psychologists working in men's football academies in England, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, DOI: 10.1080/10413200.2022.2134506

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2022.2134506>



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Published online: 19 Oct 2022.



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Confidentiality and surveillance challenges for psychologists working in men's football academies in England

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ABSTRACT

We examine challenges to confidentiality experienced by sports psychologists in men's English football academies. Sixteen psychologists, six women, and ten men working in English football academies participated in two semi-structured interviews. We carried out a reflexive thematic analysis after each round of interviews and developed two themes: (1) challenges to client-psychologist confidentiality; (2) a context of normalized surveillance. First, participants explained that several staff members (e.g., coaches, managers, and support staff) would use covert and subtle ways to make psychologists break confidentiality. This included trying to get the psychologist to "slip up." Second, the football academy context was characterized by widespread surveillance of players. It was evident that it is common practice for clubs to gather objective and self-report data creating extreme transparency in the young people's lives. We also propose two research-based solutions allowing psychologists to handle these issues.

Lay summary: Using data for talent and performance development in men's professional football academies in England is changing the context in which psychologists work. It poses new issues for confidentiality between clients and psychologists, which practitioners, clubs, and federations must consider. We propose that psychologists should work at the organizational level with leaders and coaches to handle these issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Players and parents need updated information on their rights and consent.
- Psychologists should work at the systems level with coaches and staff to prevent issues of confidentiality breaches.
- The Premier League and the English Football League must consider the influence of new technologies in developing guidelines for clubs.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 February 2022

Revised 5 October 2022

Accepted 5 October 2022

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Introduction

The modernization of sports sciences and medical services in men's English football academies accelerated after the introduction of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP; Premier League, 2011). For several years, sport psychology services trailed behind other sports sciences, despite examples of the importance of psychology for general well-being (Noon et al., 2015) and performance at the highest level in football (Nesti & Sulley, 2012). The 2019 Charter for Academy Players and Parents (English Football League, 2019) was the first to mention a specific requirement to employ an accredited sport psychologist. Almost two decades ago, Andersen et al. (2001) and Moore (2003) highlighted how organizational stressors (e.g., challenges to client-psychologist confidentiality) might put immense pressure on psychology practitioners. Especially those working in complex environments (e.g., organizations operating as sports teams as well as business entities; cf. McDougall et al., 2015). These findings and the late arrival of policy mandating the employment of accredited psychologists underscore the importance of examining how psychologists handle environmental stressors to support well-being and performance.

Our paper focuses on challenges to client-psychologist confidentiality, which may have significant ethical implications and influence the efficacy of support. Recent research into potentially unethical behaviors suggests that sports organizations can have different perceptions of socially desirable, ethical, and accepted behaviors (Feddersen & Phelan, 2022). To this end, Feddersen et al. (2021) showed that the rise of social media gave athletes a greater outlet to expose misconduct in elite sports. It is also likely that this process influenced the societal standards and perceptions of ethical and moral behaviors. Examining men's football academies is necessary to understand how the current context reinforces norms and behaviors. In the football setting, Newman et al.'s (2021) and Higham et al.'s (2022) studies are among those considering moral conflicts and anti-social behaviors (e.g., bullying). Other studies consider the role of masculinity or hypermasculinity (Champ et al., 2020) in creating challenges for sport psychology service delivery. Building on this research, we propose that it is critical to examine both challenges to client-psychologist confidentiality and the context in which they happen to propose actionable research and recommend best practices.

Furthermore, Feddersen et al. (2021) showed that societal perceptions change over time. And that this change has a significant influence on how we judge acceptable behaviors in sports. Media and technology are among the drivers of changes to norms and standards of behavior. Here, O'Gorman et al. (2021) showed that coaches in football are increasingly accountable for providing and acting upon player data (e.g., running distance, acceleration). Similarly, Watson and Coker-Cranney (2018) claimed that "the incorporation of technology by sport psychology practitioners will continue to grow exponentially" (p. 214). Technology, therefore, seems to be changing the context of elite sports. Contrasting these newer findings with Manley et al.'s (2012) examination of data gathering as a mode of surveillance in football, we see it as probable that the acceleration of technology use because the implementation of the EPPP will continue to influence norms and assumptions in sports environments.

It is impossible to steer clear of data's role in modern football academies, and much has already happened because Manley et al. (2012) described the "limited and minimal

use of data within academies” (p. 308). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of teletherapy in sports (Shortway & Wolanin, 2021) providing a new way to surveil players outside the academy setting. The rise of biofeedback (Gross et al., 2018), smartphones (Durand-Bush & DesClouds, 2018), eye-tracking (Moran et al., 2018), and virtual reality (Bird, 2020) all promise new frontiers and provide new discrete ways of monitoring players (Manley et al., 2012). Broomfield and Reutter (2022) show that such discrete monitoring methods are a datafication of individuals, with the logic of categorizing, classifying, scoring, and selecting. Such practices could have profound influences on the organization doing the monitoring and the individuals being monitored. Yet, the negative impacts of such normalized practices are rarely acknowledged.

Accordingly, new advancements create new questions regarding ethics and confidentiality. A study of technology in clinical psychology by Lustgarten and Elhai (2018) argued that all these advances require new considerations of the associated legal and ethical implications. For example, in English football, the Premier League’s Performance Management Application (PMA) is used to gather data and track individual players. Case studies from the company delivering the PMA show that some clubs collect well-being data and medical notes and that they are available to anyone with access to the app (e.g., sharing with the national team; The Sports Office, 2022). Yet, Lustgarten and Elhai (2018) noted that increasing intrusions of privacy in therapy situations and questions of who is given access to data could lead to more self-censorship by clients and impede help-seeking. Therefore, we view it as critical to understanding how assumptions regarding data gathering, surveillance, and technology influence psychologists working in football academies.

The current study is part of extensive research into implementing and refining psychology provisions in English football academies approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (reference 220245). This study provides a distinct analysis of confidentiality and surveillance (i.e., no data from the current paper has been published elsewhere). Its purpose is to examine psychologists’ experiences of challenges to confidentiality and the context in which these challenges are normalized to provide unique insights into sports psychology practice.

Methods

We study the nature of the social world (i.e., social ontology) using a social constructionist approach in the current study (Gergen, 2014), assuming that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective. Adopting this as the relationship between knowledge and the knower (i.e., epistemology) means we must negotiate our data and analysis with the participants and the research team. Therefore, we examine subjective experiences and how they relate to the participants’ social context (e.g., assumptions, logic, and historically situated environment). This approach acknowledges that understanding is jointly created; thus, the research team that developed the findings in this study is viewed as an integral part of the research process. Table 1 briefly introduces the four authors, their research, and their backgrounds.

The different roles and experiences create a team of both insiders (i.e., current practitioners in the context), an outsider (i.e., both in nationality and working sector), and

Table 1. Overview of the research team.

Researcher	Research experience	Applied experience
Feddersen, Postdoc	The focus is on organizational psychology, including how culture and organizational structures influence behaviors, performance, and well-being in elite sport.	Four years of applied experience working in rowing, football, fencing, track and field and handball, mainly at the youth level. Current applied work is mainly as an advisor to management at the organizational level.
Champ, Lecturer	A track record of research in men's football academies. Currently researching mental health in the Women's Super League.	Nine years' experience working as a sport psychologist in elite youth and senior men's and women's football.
Sæther, Associate Professor	The focus is talent development and coaching in Norwegian youth and elite sports.	Applied work mainly consists of consultancy and advisory positions to help sports organizations bridge the theory–practice gap.
Littlewood, Principal Lecturer	Extensive experience of conducting research into identity, critical moments and organizational culture in professional football. Currently supervising ecological development of applied sports psychology programmes in Premier League football Academies.	20 years of applied experience working in senior elite and youth football in the English Premier League.

one placed between these two (i.e., with significant insights and experiences from the context being research, and yet, at the time of the research working exclusively in academia; Milligan, 2016). Being at “arm’s length” from the participants’ environments provides an opportunity to scrutinize taken-for-granted assumptions and critically analyze accepted norms and standards for behavior.

Data collection and analysis procedures

We carried out a four-step procedure for data collection and analysis for this paper: (1) data collection with 16 participants using semi-structured interviews; (2) a thematic analysis following the steps of Braun and Clarke (2019); (3) returning to the participants for follow-up semi-structured interviews; and (4) returning to the thematic analysis. We address rigor throughout this section. Notably, the transparency of the research process provides significant insights into the considerations and reflections of the research team.

Participants and first data collection

We conducted a purposive sampling of 16 psychologists, six women, and ten men, working in professional football academies in England. All were employed or recently employed (i.e., within the previous three months) as sport psychologists in men’s football academies in England. We aimed to include both men and women working in the same role based on the recommendations of Champ et al. (2021) regarding the importance of including female voices in a historically male sector. Table 2 provides an

Table 2. Overview of participants.

Participant	Academy category	Gender	Full/part-time	Years in post	Years as sport psychologist	HCPC/BASES status
Participant 1	1	M	Full-time	4.5	11	HCPC Pathway to stage 2
Participant 2	1	M	Full-time	5	7	HCPC Registered
Participant 3	1	M	Full-time	3.5	8	HCPC Registered
Participant 4	1	F	Part-time	2	4	HCPC Registered
Participant 5	1	M	Full-time	1	6	HCPC Registered
Participant 6	1	M	Part-time	6	8	HCPC Pathway to stage 2
Participant 7	1	M	Part-time	2	6	HCPC Registered
Participant 8*	1	F	Full-time	10	10	HCPC Registered
Participant 9*	1	F	Full-time	1.5	11	HCPC Pathway to stage 2
Participant 10	1	F	Full-time	2	4.5	HCPC Registered
Participant 11	2	M	Part-time	0.5	4.5	HCPC Registered
Participant 12	2	F	Part-time	0.5	20	HCPC Registered
Participant 13	2	M	Part-time	1.5	2	HCPC Pathway to stage 2
Participant 14	3	M	Part-time	1.5	1.5	BASES Stage 1
Participant 15	3	M	Part-time	2	7	HCPC Pathway to stage 2
Participant 16	3	F	Part-time	3	5	BASES Stage 1
Averages				3.0	7.2	

Note. *Participants 8 and 9 only participated in one interview, citing time constraints.

overview of the participants. Seven worked full-time, and the rest combined part-time positions with other roles (e.g., Ph.D. students, lecturers, working in other sports).

The first round of data collection took place from February to March 2021. All interviews were conducted online and followed a semi-structured interview guide. Adopting the approach of Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), we set out to cover four broad themes: (i) how sport psychology was structured in participants' current clubs, (ii) how psychology provisions had changed during their careers, (iii) how the participants assess best practice and (iv) the challenges they had faced in their career. The last theme was particularly relevant to the practitioner development focus of the current study. It included questions, such as "could you tell me about your experiences of gaining buy-in and explain the process?" and "what are the biggest challenges you have experienced in working within sports psychology in football?" Each first-round interview lasted between 42 and 82 min (average duration of 57 min 37 s).

First thematic analysis

We carried out an inductive reflexive thematic analysis following the general steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). The first three steps of the analysis were carried out separately by the first and second authors (i.e., 1: familiarizing yourself with the data, 2: generating initial codes, and 3: searching for themes). The second author only had access to interviews with anonymized participants and clubs. Following a social constructionist approach, the separate analyses allowed the two researchers in the United Kingdom (i.e., authors 2 and 4) and the two in Norway (i.e., authors 1 and 3) to negotiate the findings and act as critical friends (Costa & Kallick, 1993) to each other by probing the findings. The social constructionist approach also influenced this process as the two researchers in the United Kingdom can be viewed as insiders and the two in Norway as one moving from insider to an outsider (Milligan, 2016) and one an outsider to the specific context. The flexibility of thematic analysis allowed the authors to construct themes together instead of individually (Gergen, 2014).

The whole author team negotiated the findings by comparing the two separate analyses. This analysis stage allowed us to develop two initial themes (i.e., challenges to confidentiality and assumptions of transparency) related to our research topic—confidentiality and context (i.e., Step 4 in reflexive thematic analysis). Developing these themes also involved creating new questions for a second round of interviews to negotiate our findings with the participants in keeping with a social constructionist approach. The second interview also helped us engage further with the participants to keep developing rapport, reflect on the findings (i.e., member reflections; cf. Smith & McGannon, 2018), and probe inconsistencies.

Second data collection

The first author conducted the second round of interviews between June and October 2021. Two participants did not participate in the second interview due to time constraints (see Table 2). These interviews also followed a semi-structured guide and the recommendations of Brinkmann and Kvale (2018). The interviews began with an open question: “Since the last interview, have you had any further thoughts related to your job as a psychologist?” Afterward, the first author focused on the following themes developed in the first round of analysis: practitioner philosophy, a focus on performance, individual and systems-level provisions, and surveillance and confidentiality (e.g., “several participants told us about significant transparency in terms of players’ personal lives; what is your experience in this regard?” and “how do you deal with consent for players younger than 16 years old?”). Each second-round interview lasted between 20 and 47 min (average duration: 33 min 8 s). Conducting two rounds of interviews helped us engage with the participants beyond merely letting them read and comment on transcripts. We could instead negotiate our findings with them in keeping with the social constructionist approach. Asking the participants questions about the themes and their insights helped us scrutinize our work and create analytical depth by highlighting differences and commonalities.

Returning to thematic analysis

The second round of reflexive thematic analysis followed a similar approach to the first round. However, only the first author carried out the initial three steps of the analysis. This process also entailed considering how the new findings linked to raw data from the first rounds of interviews and analysis. The first author then presented the new codes to the rest of the team to review potential themes (i.e., Step 4 in reflexive thematic analysis), whether to construct new themes, reconstruct themes that needed significant changes or add to the themes. In the current study, both initial themes were reconstructed (i.e., Step 5 in reflexive thematic analysis) to “challenges to client–psychologist confidentiality” (i.e., due to clients being both players and other staff) and “a context of normalized surveillance” (i.e., findings from the second interviews showed that confidentiality was tightly interwoven with surveillance). All the authors participated in drafting the current paper; the writing process often entailed revisiting the raw data to re-read passages (i.e., Step 6 in reflexive thematic analysis).

Research rigor

Analyzing the context also entailed searching the data for common examples of challenges that supported or contradicted the findings. The transparency of the analysis process and how we made judgments add to the research credibility established by carrying out multiple interviews to allow for participant reflections (Smith & McGannon, 2018) and having additional researchers act as critical friends. Feedback from the research team and other colleagues suggested alternative ways to approach the analysis and provided critical questions at each stage. From the first analysis, we handled disputes in the research team by posing them as questions to the participants in the follow-up interviews. When disputes remained after the second round of analysis, the first author finalized descriptions of the themes.

Findings and discussion

We divide our findings into three sections. First, we cover “challenges to client–psychologist confidentiality” to focus on individual psychologists and their experiences. Second, we consider the “context of normalized surveillance,” which creates a special set of norms and standards for acceptable behavior. This theme helps us examine why behaviors that would be viewed as unethical and unprofessional in most sectors are seemingly taken for granted and commonplace in this context. The first two sections also compare individual experiences (e.g., challenges to client–psychologist confidentiality) at the personal level with the context. Last, we propose two solutions and strategies that psychologists and clubs can implement to enhance the efficacy of sport psychology in football academies. We also discuss relevant literature to relate our findings to prior research. Also, participant quotes are presented as Participant ##.1 or ##.2 to signify from which interview the extract originated.

Challenges to client–psychologist confidentiality

The first theme provides an overview of the participants’ individual experiences of challenges to client–psychologist confidentiality. All participants had different experiences of coaches, other support staff, or management trying to gain insights into players’ confidential information attained through one-on-one psychology support. It was clear that many coaches and staff did so out of genuine care for the players. However, some experiences revealed ethical grey areas.

Previous research (Andersen et al., 2001; Moore, 2003) highlights that challenges to confidentiality are common and that this specific context might create complicated patterns distinct from other sectors. In this study, patterns refer to anticipated and unanticipated behaviors, which for a time provide contextually specific challenges and solutions. Furthermore, from a social constructionist view, we also acknowledge that current challenges are historically situated and likely distinct from previous research. In our analysis, we developed an overview showing three common patterns: (i) other staff members sharing confidential information, (ii) trying to get the psychologist to “slip up” and (iii) explicitly demanding that psychologists break confidentiality.

Other staff members sharing confidential information

First, many of our participants explained that sharing some information about player–psychologist collaboration can benefit player well-being and development (i.e., with the player or parental consent). Most examples of information sharing were related to return to play after injury, where psychologists collaborated with medical practitioners, physiotherapists, and strength and conditioning staff. One participant explained how this was based on interpersonal relationships:

I think it's sometimes valuable to share the information that the players expressed to me (with their consent) with other members in the team ... it may be if it's something that is of interest to the physio and the strength training conditioner, the three of us have a strong relationship, and we are connected and we frequently discuss a number of individuals to provide the necessary support. (Participant 15.1, Category 3)

Similar suggestions from our participants support Bickley et al. (2016) in indicating that collaborating and sharing knowledge can help create a coordinated action plan and support robust case formulation. Additionally, a recent study (Gervis et al., 2020) highlights the importance of psychological support during long-term injury and properly trained psychological staff working with other medical staff.

Moore (2003) pointed out that sports psychologists must maintain multiple relationships (e.g., with players, coaches, and support staff) when supporting athletes, for example through injury. She also indicated that these relationships may require sports psychologists to assume various roles in different hierarchies. Being involved in multiple teams means that psychologists must navigate whether such relationships violate boundary issues or harm established therapeutic alliances with clients (Moore, 2003). In our interviews, we probed the research and participants' suggestion that it might be legitimate to share knowledge. This led to participants providing examples, such as the one below:

We've actually, in the last week, had an instance where one of our coaches who knew about this, kind of a mental health incident, and was ... told in confidence ... shared that information with multiple other coaches. (Participant 5.2, Category 1)

This quote shows the first pattern of challenges to confidentiality. The distinguishing feature of this pattern is that information is shared based on the psychologist seeking consent and on the understanding that confidentiality will be maintained. However, the information is later shared with other staff members without due consent. This pattern could occur when individuals collaborate in multidisciplinary teams and navigate multiple relationships (Moore, 2003). Andersen et al. (2001) noted that such challenges can occur in the sports context, where boundaries of what is public information are often blurred.

Trying to get the psychologist to “slip Up”

The second pattern of challenges is characterized by how coaches, managers, and support staff use subtle ways to gain insights. This more subtle pattern may occur in non-therapeutic and seemingly social interactions with club staff (Moore, 2003). Here is a typical example:

You do also get the coaches that don't directly ask but almost try to get you to 'slip up' ... they'll say, 'Oh, you know, so-and-so just had an absolute howler at the weekend. I reckon it's because of x, y and z. What do you think?' Okay, so you're trying to dig? I can't answer. And they know that they're doing it. But if you say, 'I can't.' They'll go, 'Oh, I didn't even mean to ... I know that that's totally not okay ... sorry'. I think they almost push their luck ... to get information. (Participant 16.1, Category 3)

Several participants had similar experiences, and the common reflection was that the coaches often explained that they asked out of concern for the players. For example, one participant explained: "Most of them do it because they genuinely just want to help. [They say] 'If I know this information, maybe I can do something about it'" (Participant 7.2, Category 1). Andersen et al. (2001) suggested that psychologists must consider whose interests are being served in such instances.

Shaping this pattern is the fact that sports psychologists in football often work in an environment demanding frequent interactions with all other staff in an academy. Andersen et al. (2001) indicated that players are often overheard or seen talking to psychologists because a lot of service delivery occurs in public in this environment. The frequent interactions with coaches and service delivery to players in the environment blur the boundaries between confidential and public. In these instances, our participants explained that it could be difficult to maintain confidentiality, especially for early-career psychologists:

Yeah, there's definitely an element of just raw courage ... especially at 22 [years old]. I think the challenge is how desperate you are for the opportunities and how much your career probably depends on whether or not this next bit goes well. (Participant 3.2, Category 1)

The "opportunities" mentioned in the quote above refer to, the attractive features (e.g., public exposure and attention) related to working in professional football, which several participants spoke of as having an almost seductive allure. Furthermore, opportunities also referred to the scarcity and precarious nature of the job. Similar to Gilmore et al. (2018), we found the perception that psychologists are the first to be released from their roles due to budget cuts and the intangible nature of the work compared to other sports sciences, which rely on more quantifiable data. Together, these two aspects created moral difficulties when other staff tried to make them breach confidentiality.

Explicit demands for psychologists to break confidentiality

The last pattern features direct and explicit demands for psychologists to share information about players. Our findings show that these experiences are infrequent and much less widespread than the other two patterns described above. Nonetheless, the ethical issues surrounding such behaviors can significantly pressure psychologists due to power imbalances in the club hierarchy (Moore, 2003). The quote below is an example of this pattern:

You can read about it on paper, and the [The British Psychological Society] and [the British Association for Sport and Exercise Sciences] can produce guidelines about what you're supposed to do. But ... when one of the most influential people at [your club] comes up to you and goes, 'Just letting you know, the previous guy that was here used to

tell me everything that the players had been saying and show me the report. My expectation is that you do the same, and if you don't, I'm going to fire you'. (Participant 7.2, Category 1)

Such behavior is troublesome to most psychologists because they are put in a position where they will breach ethical and professional codes of conduct if they comply with the request (cf. BPS, 2021). The issues around direct and explicit demands are related to a point made by Moore (2003), who noted that in some instances, coaches, support staff, or sports organizations may be allowed to request information regardless of player approval. Such obligations must, however, be clearly outlined, and Moore (2003) argued that only relevant information should be shared in such instances. In line with this, a participant explained a common belief shared by those who had experienced this serious challenge to client–psychologist confidentiality: “Football struggles with this immensely around confidentiality. [Some people] think they should know everything. And there have been reasons why I'm no longer working in certain places” (Participant 12.1, Category 2).

A significant issue in all three patterns is that confidentiality is a cornerstone of therapeutic alliance and efficacy (Moore, 2003). A problem that participants repeatedly returned to was how a history of breached confidentiality created mistrust in the psychologists: “There are players who definitely have had their fingers burnt and don't trust the sport psych because the sport psychologist has been telling everybody everything” (Participant 12.1, Category 2). Studies (Andersen et al., 2001; Moore, 2003) point out that it is critical to negotiate confidentiality with clients. However, our findings above show that in doing so, individuals might not address underlying contextual issues, as the next section explains. Our findings show that the problems concerning confidentiality outlined by Moore and Andersen et al. remain relevant today. Yet, the observable patterns of the issues are different due to interactions with the current context.

A context of normalized surveillance

During our analysis of patterns leading to challenges to confidentiality, we started considering the context in which these behaviors and actions were seemingly common. Previous research on unethical and unprofessional behaviors in sports organizations (Feddersen & Phelan, 2022) suggests that such behaviors are more common than expected and are generally seen as unproblematic due to rationales (e.g., reasons for action) that are specific to a context (e.g., football academies) at a specific time. It was, therefore, critical to examine the accepted norms, behaviors, and standards of practice to understand why our participants experienced these challenges. We added questions to the second interview guide to probe these issues.

Going back and forth between the data from the first and second interviews, we developed a deeper understanding of a context in which surveillance is normalized. We observed that top-down data-gathering practices influenced the datafication of players (i.e., turning most aspects of the development process into quantifiable data). Four sub-themes explain this context: (i) gathering data, (ii) surveillance, (iii) the performance management application, and (iv) consent.

Gathering data

Gathering data refers to top-down practices where clubs gathered objective (e.g., GPS data, fat percentage) and self-reported data on a range of measures (e.g., diet, sleep quality). It is also official policy (e.g., Premier League, 2011) to use physical tests and re-tests to benchmark “athletic development” (p. 65) and modernize sports science and medicine. Research from other sports sciences (e.g., strength and conditioning or physiotherapy) argues that gathering data is necessary to prevent nonfunctional overreaching (Noon et al., 2015) and injury (Tears et al., 2018), among others. We agree that such data can be valuable to aid player development. Our participants expressed that data gathering is normalized and seen as unproblematic:

They do have GPS measurements that are taken ... every day at training and matches ... we also get a weekly report from our strength training conditioner with regard to distances covered, high speeds and anyone who sets new targets ... I think it's normal for the players. It's been normalized as part of their academy life. (Participant 15.2, Category 1)

The normalization was also apparent in how clubs publicly displayed leaderboards: “So, you’ve got, like, how fast they were in the game, how much they covered. And week in, week out, all these leaderboards are put up on the wall” (Participant 7, Category 1). Displaying leaderboards might be an effort to inspire players to strive toward higher rankings and thereby facilitate development. Yet, most participants explained that they rather inspire bullying amongst players (e.g., public humiliation). According to our participants, very few clubs ever considered the potential drawbacks to gathering data. Instead, our findings show that the focus was on providing innovative and specific feedback.

We found the common perception that new staff, players, and their parents are gradually socialized into accepting these practices and this transparency. Acceptance might be facilitated by their eagerness to accelerate development. In addition, research suggests that power differentials between coaches and athletes may lead to athletes accepting some practices without question (Wachsmuth et al., 2018).

Based on our findings, we tentatively assert that acceptance of these practices might be related to parents and players looking for proxies for the expertise and assuming that coaches and staff provide unquestionable truths. We argue that our findings support Krane and Waldron’s (2021) suggestion that not questioning practices is critical to receive benefits and resources. In this case, not questioning refers to coaches and staff not questioning why they gather data and parents and players not questioning directives from club staff.

Surveillance

We developed the theme “surveillance” to show the process in which gathering data helped justify staff attempting to gain insights into psychologist-player collaborations. Our analysis showed that player surveillance is pervasive and that the data often speak for and about the players’ development. The backdrop to this could be related to coaches’ perceptions of job insecurity. Our participants explained that coaches are vulnerable due to their increasing accountability for developing players for the senior first team or selling them to other clubs. For example, Participant 12.2 from a Category 2 academy stated:

You know that [the coaches] are so fearful ... they're so vulnerable ... 'I know why you want to [know]. You're feeling threatened'. So, [the coaches] are thinking, 'Oh, I don't know stuff ... if I know stuff that'll make me feel better'.

As the quote indicates, knowing “stuff” might create a sense of control over player development. Here, the process was to first make “development” visible (i.e., gather data) by using technological advancements, as exemplified by the quote below:

They know how far he ran. They know the passes. They can watch it back. They've got video evidence of it. But now the player goes away with someone into a room that they'd have to ask for permission to be part of. Maybe it's a perception of control from the coaches. (Participant 13.1, Category 2)

The next step in the process was how increased data production (i.e., increased visibility of development) created a perception of control over player development. That is, designing ways for the players to produce better data and assuming that this would be useful to player development.

As shown, coach anxieties could explain why coaches and staff expect openness in terms of their players' psychology and mental well-being despite ethical issues related to confidentiality. Participant 7.1 from a Category 1 academy outlined how efforts to maintain a sense of control lead to attempts to implement complete transparency:

There's a sense from the lads that it's almost like 24/7 surveillance. There's nothing that they can do that isn't reported on or measured or judged against. Especially the lads that are picked to get reports from parents when they're away from the club.

The quote above shows that overt and discreet surveillance (Manley et al., 2012) is pervasive. Transparency in terms of almost all aspects of life, practice, and performance shows players and staff what is valued and believed to facilitate improvement. That is, providing better data. The transparency provided by gathering data and discreet surveillance are distinct from examples of “overhearing” or maintaining confidentiality in multiple relationships provided by Andersen et al. (2001).

The performance management application

The technology at the center of the surveillance and confidentiality issues in football academies is the PMA, which stores information about players. Two early-career sports psychologists explained that they provide some information about psychology provisions on the PMA: “Despite the issues, one-to-one work is stored privately on the PMA. It is only accessible to certain individuals” (Participant 16.2, Category 3). Likewise, Participant 15.2 from a Category 3 academy stated: “We type up bits of information on there as well.” Our findings show that the issues with the PMA were related to a lack of clarification regarding how confidential player data is protected and who is given access.

The original EPPP (Premier League, 2011) envisioned that the data uploaded to the PMA would remain “confidential to the club” (p. 18). Despite the assumption of participants 15 and 16 that only “a few individuals” can access the PMA, we know that the Premier League accessed the PMA to gather data. For example, 27 clubs are part of the National Injury Surveillance Project (Premier League, 2021). In line with Lustgarten and Elhai (2018), we argue that it is troublesome if psychological and medical information

is no longer kept confidential to a person or a club. Issues of who can access the PMA might even impede early identification and effective support, which is key to mental health support in elite sports according to a recent consensus statement (Henriksen et al., 2020). Especially because players might already be self-censoring: “I think for [the players], any sign of weakness is seen as a bad thing ... they don’t want to give coaches or staff or other players any reason to doubt them whatsoever” (Participant 16.1, Category 3). Using the PMA to store psychological data could exacerbate self-censorship instead of helping football academies cultivate help-seeking behaviors. The following quote outlines some of these issues and how managers might use the PMA for surveillance:

I was asked about two months into the job at [club]: ‘[Participant 7], I noticed that you have not worked with any players yet’. I said, ‘What do you mean?’ He said, ‘There’s nothing’s on the PMA’. [I said,] ‘I’m not going anywhere near that programme. There’s absolutely no chance I’m putting anything on there’. He’s like, ‘Okay, I get that’ ... The people that are going on PMA and writing notes ... anyone can find the code to that. The people that have the power to go on PMA, the people who design the programme, could just log in at any point and be like, ‘Oh, this lad at [Premier League club] is struggling with this’. You can’t be doing that. For me, that’s really unethical practice. (Participant 7.2, Category 1)

Consent

The confidentiality matters related to who can access the data via the PMA and normalized surveillance also pertain to important questions regarding consent. The British Psychological Society (BPS) code of Human Research states that “psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over persons and peoples and with particular regard to people’s rights” (Oates et al., 2021, p. 7). This statement highlights the importance of considering the power and the presence of dependent or unequal relationships. Parental or carer consent is also required for children younger than 16 years of age. These issues are complicated by recent technological advances (e.g., availability of technology for data gathering), which requires that future research explore consent beyond this study because most participants focused on consent to share information directly with other staff. The quote below outlines how sports psychologists sometimes seek consent to discuss cases with a clinical psychologist:

Yeah, when I’m working with a clinical psych ... I always asked the player: ‘Do you mind if I run this past a colleague of mine? So it’s still confidential, but to produce the best possible help that I can ... Would you mind me doing it?’ And so far, every single player has said yes. Whether that’s because of the rapport that I’ve got with that particular player, I don’t know. So I’ve been very fortunate where I haven’t had a no. (Participant 8.1, Category 1)

The end of the quote also shows that very few players refuse to give consent. Because of relationships based on intrinsic asymmetric power dynamics (e.g., dependency for resources), people often accept directives to access resources and benefits (e.g., feedback or care; Krane & Waldron, 2021). The BPS (2021) stipulates that such an unequal power relationship can be shaped by the context, such as the one outlined above, in which transparency and surveillance are widespread. Therefore, it might be taken for

granted that all players participate. Seeking consent to share information in such a context will be influenced by those norms.

We also found that coaches and staff might reinforce demands for information sharing due to recent pressures related to their duty of care in the wake of significant mental health concerns in young footballers. An example is the former Manchester City youth player Jeremy Wisten, who died by suicide (BBC, 2021). Participant 5.2 from a Category 1 academy explained how this pressure might arise:

If a player says they don't want something shared, then we can't share it. Still, I think, one side of it is pressure on us to feel like we have to tell x, y, z coach what's going on ... [it's] like covering our backs in a way. If something goes wrong, are we going to get blamed? That's happened recently with a player who struggled with anxiety and was working with me on a one-to-one basis. [Player] actually left the academy, but he asked for it to be confidential ... one of the coaches who found out about this later down the line started having a right go at us and saying our decision-making processes were poor, and that we didn't support the player properly because we didn't inform the coach.

The pressure on coaches and clubs due to cases, such as that of Jeremy Wisten could increase the demands on psychologists to share information because clubs want to show that they have taken all proper measures. As the quote above shows, a psychologist's choice not to share information about a player's anxiety was criticized as poor decision-making. The multifaceted issues around consent in football academies remind us that some issues might be outside the scope of sports psychologists' competencies. To address such issues, it is critical to have clear lines of communication and support with a clinical psychologist or sports psychiatrist (Andersen et al., 2001). Although demands for information may not reach the point of coercion, sports psychologists must carefully implement consent procedures (e.g., with questions to which a child can be expected to say no).

Applied implications of a context of normalized surveillance

We now offer two research-based suggestions that clubs could implement to ensure ethical psychology delivery and enhance its efficacy. Both are based on how our participants addressed the challenges they faced in their context with normalized surveillance. They are not exhaustive, yet our participants explained that they help respond to their current working context. Our two recommended solutions below propose changes to what most psychologists, coaches, managers, and clubs might view as the main task for sports psychologists (i.e., working with players). They move the psychologist from working predominantly one-to-one or with player groups to being an organizational psychologist working on a systems level. The quote below explains some of the challenges that this might pose to clubs and psychologists:

[It involves] helping organizations and clubs to redefine what the roles and responsibilities of a sport psychologist are ... I actually think that as sport psychologists, at times, we can be quite anxious ... working with individuals is actually quite an avoidance strategy to protect ourselves, as opposed to stepping out of our comfort zone and working on a more systemic level. (Participant 2.2, Category 1)

As the quote demonstrates, implementing these recommendations involves changes for both clubs and psychologists. Nevertheless, we believe they are important steps to improve sport psychology provisions in football.

Coaches learning from engaging in sport psychology

Based on recommendations made by our participants, we propose that working with coaches on a one-to-one basis could be a natural first step. Our findings show that coaches often assume that there should be complete transparency regarding players' lives and that coaches often try to gain such insights due to their organizational stressors (e.g., increased accountability; O'Gorman et al., 2021). When we probed these issues with our participants, several explained that some coaches and other support staff do not know much about sports psychology. One participant commented: "I was chatting to our Head of Sport Science at a club. [The] first thing they're saying [is] 'I don't think I know what world-class psychology looks like'" (Participant 6.2, Category 1). The lack of understanding of sport psychology might also feed the perception that psychologists must uncritically deliver confidential information. The quote below discusses the influence of these apparent hierarchies:

I've literally been to [continued professional development] events where they've said, 'coach is king'. So, the coach is the boss, and we're support staff underneath that person. I think some coaches who perhaps don't understand sport psychology as well as they could do just see it as an expectation that I should be giving them this information. (Participant 7.2, Category 1)

In light of our findings on challenges to confidentiality, we believe that working directly with coaches might change some of these hierarchies. Currently, the EPPP mainly focuses on psychology service delivery for players. However, many of our participants explained that one of the keys to successfully delivering psychology provisions was to engage with coaches and staff at the systemic level. That is, to influence understanding and thereby norms and behavior. Working at the systems level may involve supporting coaches' continued development (cf. Olusoga et al., 2014) or one-to-one work with coaches and staff. Clubs and the Premier League should consider coach support as a core feature of psychology provisions. Besides the inherent value of psychology support, such delivery might also create more informed perceptions of the value of confidentiality in the client-psychologist collaboration. The following quote explains this point:

I had a great conversation once with a coach who was engaging in long-term confidential work and asking me to break confidentiality with players ... He said, 'I don't understand how confidentiality helps when it comes to the players'. And I was like, 'Well, does it help with you? Like, do you want me to tell your boss what we talk about to help him?' And he was like, 'Well, no, obviously not'. (Participant 3.2, Category 1)

The quote shows that although working with coaches does not directly inform them of the value of confidentiality and the issues regarding surveillance, it does create more awareness. Working with coaches might be the critical first step to creating better collaboration in multidisciplinary teams. Seeing and experiencing the benefits of sport psychology support for themselves could remove some of the stigma and misunderstandings. Clarifying the benefits of confidentiality could also enable more coach-player-psychologist collaboration by allowing players and psychologists to be less fearful of coaches sharing confidential information (i.e., Pattern 1). Our findings suggest that merely providing information on the benefits of confidentiality and psychology provisions for players is futile. Instead, we recommend that clubs and psychologists set up psychology provisions for coaches, to which they can opt-in (Olusoga et al., 2014) and thereby experience the benefits themselves.

Sharing information with coaches and multidisciplinary teams

Our findings suggest that it might be helpful for coaches to know what players are going through; however, the confidentiality challenges seem to create many potential downsides. The quote below shows how a psychologist can appropriately facilitate the sharing of information with coaches:

[I say to the player,] ‘It might be really helpful if the coach understood this about you. Maybe we should sit down together and have this conversation’. And often the player is open to that. They say no, then that’s fine. It is off the [table](#). If they say yes, then I kind of go facilitate it. So, I say the difficult stuff for them. And that helps the coach because they go, ‘Ah, okay, I get it. Now I understand this’. (Participant 12.2, Category 2)

Sharing information through proper channels and procedures can facilitate better understanding. In line with these recommendations, Participant 2.2 from a Category 1 academy advised “working with coaches to help the coaches develop the player.” The crux is that all our participants agreed that sharing information with coaches can be beneficial. However, a lack of understanding or coaches sharing confidential information or trying to get psychologists to “slip up” creates a context in which information sharing stops due to ethical issues.

Psychologists can facilitate information sharing using a case formulation protocol in multidisciplinary teams. Yet, it is important to be mindful that the current context involving the fear of confidential information being shared probably raises invisible walls between staff members. Bickley et al. (2016) noted that such a context could lead to conflict within a staff group (i.e., interpersonal stressors) and, thereby, uncoordinated player support. At worst, these conflicts might exacerbate player challenges (e.g., injuries or ill-being). The quote below shows how psychologists might be ideally placed to facilitate case formulation for coordinated player support:

A recent role that I played was almost the case formulator role with a player in the under-23s. I was managing the clinical psych, the player care, the physio, [I] was talking with them every day ... I was managing each of those individuals and how they were having those conversations [with the player] (Participant 5.2, Category 1)

Developing a shared understanding through case formulation can draw on expertise from multiple angles to create an agreed approach to support (Bickley et al., 2016). Formulating a shared understanding requires agreeing on confidentiality. In most cases, we recommend that confidentiality be maintained among the staff involved in the case formulation and those carrying out the agreed-upon support. Bickley et al. (2016) explained that psychologists could be ideal facilitators due to their significant expertise in interpersonal problem-solving and behavior change.

Concluding thoughts

The study examined psychologists’ experiences of challenges to confidentiality and the context in which these challenges are normalized. The critical finding in our study is that the context creates an implicit top-down expectation of transparency due to accepted surveillance (i.e., disempowered players). In this context, children and adolescents in male football academies might turn into datafied football players with limited involvement in questions of how the data impacts them. We observed that sport

psychologists must consider how these top-down efforts in talent development influence their own working conditions. Psychologists experienced being challenged on their client confidentiality as they had to negotiate power structures in the club, for themselves, and for disempowered players. With the pervasive data gathering, notions of player-centered development might be nothing more than tokenistic, with clubs owning and controlling all projects (e.g., gathering training data). Our participants explained that their current solution to counter basic assumptions of transparency in the psychologist-client setting was working with coaches and staff. Doing so created staff awareness of the value of confidentiality. Our findings could have wider implications for the importance of previous recommendations regarding collaboration in multidisciplinary teams (Bickley et al., 2016). An essential first step would be for the Premier League to widen the policy regarding the remit of sport psychology.

We agree that our analysis of gathering data might be viewed as negative. But, we also acknowledge that using new technologies is a central part of sports and can have positive consequences. Research into nonfunctional overreaching (Noon et al., 2015), injury (Tears et al., 2018), and strength development (Smothers et al., 2021) shows that gathering data can aid adequate recovery and limit injury. Smothers et al. (2021) explain that the modernization spurred on by the EPPP creates an evidence-informed nature of practice, where cutting-edge research in fundamental movement skills or strength development are at the frontlines. Nevertheless, focusing intensely on how to carry out technical measurements without considering the implications of advancements can lead to people slipping into unethical behaviors (Feddersen & Phelan, 2022). As sport science advances, so should conversations on the ethical and professional boundaries for acceptable practice.

Our findings showed that the challenges to client-psychologist confidentiality can be viewed as organizational stressors (*cf.* Simpson et al., 2021), which can “reduce performance” and have “severe health consequences” (p. 1). In this case, psychologists. Additionally, the pressure on coaches to both deliver on development targets, and mental well-being issues can also be viewed as an organizational stressor, ultimately leading to coaches challenging confidentiality. Both staff groups might share or ask for information due to wanting to “cover their backs” or genuine care. Simpson et al. (2021) state that interpersonal stressors are underpinned by situational and environmental demands (e.g., job insecurity). Our findings support this claim and extend it by tentatively suggesting that coach stressors (e.g., relationships, scrutiny in decision-making, and job insecurity) might negatively influence other staff groups or athletes. Future research could build on this by examining how stressors felt by specific staff groups in elite sports environments influence stress on others.

Findings relating to organizational stress also complicate the way we view confidentiality. From a deterministic perspective, we might recommend that all challenges to confidentiality are unequivocally unethical. However, understanding the influence of the context in which these challenges occur allows us to consider the underlying issues. Recent research in sports organizations (Feddersen et al., 2020; Feddersen & Phelan, 2022) has dealt with questions of legitimate behaviors and how people in a context or culture create a set of special norms and standards. These norms are often based on their perceived threats to achieving goals or other organizational stressors. In the

current research, the context has similarities to the contexts presented in Manley et al. (2012) and Jones and Denison (2017), albeit with a significant change from minimal to pervasive data gathering and use. Based on O’Gorman et al. (2021) we suggest that data might create a sense of control over player development for individuals in precarious employment. Accordingly, our participants explained that coaches are a vulnerable group trying to maintain a sense of control. The organizational stressors they experience might indirectly lead to accepting norms of extreme transparency into all aspects of players’ lives. Addressing confidentiality and consent might, therefore, start with addressing coach stressors. We recommend that sport psychology policy should provide guidance for sports psychologists to work at the systems level. Not doing so might keep the status quo with limited help-seeking and stigma toward psychology.

Last, we want to consider how the issues highlighted in our paper related to recommendations in mental health consensus statements. Moesch et al. (2018) argued that there is limited information on setting up an effective mental health support system. Our study suggests that the men’s football academies’ current system does not change this claim. Issues around who can access knowledge (Lustgarten & Elhai, 2018) might impede players’ help-seeking because it perpetuates unwillingness to being in a vulnerable position. The ordinary approach often proposes education on the benefits of help-seeking, as exemplified by recent consensus statements (Henriksen et al., 2020; Moesch et al., 2018). However, we assert that most, if not everyone, involved with elite sport understands the possible mental health issues. Yet, the distance between knowing and acting remains. We recommend that having a sport psychologist work at the systemic level (e.g., overseeing case formulation) would be a more productive step. Yet, such efforts need policy support, of which the current EPPP sport psychology policy is severely lacking.

Reflections on strengths and limitations

Carrying out this research in a team including researchers with significant first-hand experience related to football and outsiders allowed us to compare contextual knowledge with critical views of the context. Exploring the data from multiple angles helped create depth and nuance in outlining important issues and substantially understanding their contextual features. Although this creates a foundation for moving research and practice forward, we acknowledge the importance of future research with other staff groups. We also extended a long tradition of conducting individual interviews in sport psychology research (Culver et al., 2012). An issue with this tradition is that researchers view all questions through the same lens (i.e., the individual interview). We attempted to counter problems related to this data collection strategy (e.g., availability bias, self-serving bias) by adding a second round of interviews that allowed the participants to reflect critically on our early findings (i.e., member reflection; Smith & McGannon, 2018).

Suggestions for future research

The context presented in the current paper shows how normalized surveillance through gathering data is turning children and adolescents into datafied football players. We

observed a technocratic approach to talent development, which is likely to continue with the emergence of new technologies. We also failed to observe any player power, and they are seemingly not regarded as stakeholders by some staff groups. Hence, future research could examine the role of players in the datafication. We also believe that researchers should explore how datafication influence player well-being regarding a new kind of identity foreclosure, that is being one's data instead of being one's sport.

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