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Pressure to Provide a Solution: One-to-One Support with an Elite Junior
Gymnast

Abstract

This article presents a reflective case study, from the perspective of a trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist, of an applied consultancy experience with a 14-year old gymnast. The case study highlights a number of applied challenges, such as: working with a client in an unfamiliar sport, questioning who the client is throughout the consultancy process, adopting a philosophy of practice different from the expectations of the parents and further difficulties when including parents within the consultancy process. The case study also highlights how challenges to a practitioner's philosophy of practice can be deeply uncomfortable and involve the practitioner to question their approach to service delivery. Although the intervention only lasted three sessions, there are a number of observations and lessons to be learnt from an applied perspective, such as: being aware of countertransference when building relationships with a client and understanding how the dynamics of the consultancy process might change when involving parents.

Keywords: ethical practice, holistic support, anxiety, countertransference

Pressure to Provide a Solution: One-to-One Support with an Elite Junior Gymnast

To be effective as an applied sport psychology practitioner, individuals must be able to regulate themselves as both a person and a practitioner (Poczwadowski, 2017), whilst delivering effective interventions with an applied setting (Poczwadowski & Sherman, 2011). Reflective practice can enhance an individual's effectiveness within an applied context by increasing a practitioner's self-awareness and providing them with a platform to make sense of their applied experiences (Knowles, Gilborune, Tomlinson, & Anderson, 2007). Reflective practice can also allow applied practitioners to understand themselves within their context (Fletcher & Maher, 2013), generate practice-based knowledge (Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007) and develop a coherent philosophy of practice within the unique environment of professional sport (Larsen, 2017). The following case study, delivered by a trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist, provides a detailed overview of an applied consultancy experience with a 14-year old gymnast. The client experiences a multitude of challenges simultaneously and the first author relies heavily on reflective practice throughout the consultancy process to make sense of and learn from the variety of challenges presented.

Context

The Practitioner

At the time of the consultancy experience, I was 24 years of age and was four months into my British Psychological Society (BPS) Stage Two training. BPS Stage Two training requires applied practitioners to demonstrate a multitude of competencies across four distinct areas: ethical practice, research, dissemination and applied practice. Prior to my enrolment on the BPS training pathway, I had engaged in applied practice within two Premier League football academies and so had had multiple opportunities to reflect upon my own philosophy of practice (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). This philosophy of practice was based around the holistic long-term development of both the person and the athlete (Friesen

& Orlick, 2010), with the belief that performance and well-being were inescapably linked (Brady & Maynard, 2010). The development of this approach to applied consultancy was undoubtedly influenced by my supervisor at the time (Tod, 2007), but had also been strengthened through the clients I had worked with within professional football. These individuals would often experience multiple critical moments throughout their careers (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012). which required a long-term holistic focus, as opposed to the use of mental skills training to reduce the symptoms of the experience (Corlett, 1996). Furthermore, by adopting a philosophy of practice that was underpinned by my core values and beliefs (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004), I had been able to work congruently within an applied setting (Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2007). However, during these applied experiences, I had not had the opportunity to transfer this philosophy of practice into other contexts and sports and I was mindful that I needed to demonstrate more diversity in my training, which could be achieved by working with a variety of sports and athletes. Moreover, as a male practitioner, it was important for me to gain experience of working with female clients in an unfamiliar sport, to enhance my development as an applied practitioner.

The Client

The client (CS), involved in the following case study, is a 14-year-old female, elite junior gymnast, currently competing nationally and internationally within her sport. Gymnastics is a sport that requires early specialisation (Baker, Cobley, & Fraser-Thomas, 2009) and involves intensive training programmes that can lead to athletes growing up too soon and losing their childhoods (Pinheiro, Pimenta, Resende, & Malcolm, 2014). The demands of the sport can often prevent individuals from engaging in activities that would be viewed as 'normal' by others (David, 2004). CS had recently injured her ankle performing a dismount from the uneven bars and had been attending physiotherapy sessions. The owner of

the clinic recommended to both CS and her father that they contact myself for some psychological support. CS's father contacted me directly and explained that upon her return to training, his daughter was experiencing a 'mental block' on the move that had caused the initial injury. CS had a competition in six weeks that she and her coaches were now preparing for and the 'mental block' was preventing her performing a move that was integral to the routine for the competition. As a result of this, both her coach and her father were growing increasingly frustrated at her lack of progress and her father was keen to highlight that he wanted her to overcome this challenge as soon as possible. It is often the case that parents place their trust and faith in the coach, as they lack the experience and knowledge to support their child themselves (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). The role of the gymnastics coach should be to create an appropriate motivational climate and reduce any anxiety gymnasts might be experiencing (White & Bennie, 2015). However, based on the phone call with CS's father, it seemed both he and the coach were putting pressure on CS to overcome the 'mental block' before the competition in 6 weeks' time. In addition to the 'mental block', CS's father also explained how the family had recently moved countries so that CS could train at a more elite gymnastics club. CS's father did acknowledge that this could be having an impact on her current lack of development as an athlete and recognised some of the broader challenges involved with this transition.

The Consultancy Process

Reflections Prior to Intake

After the phone call with CS's father I was both excited and apprehensive. The prospect of working with a new client was exciting, especially in a sport in which I had little experience of working. However, I felt anxious as CS's father had given me the impression that he wanted me to provide a 'quick-fix' to the 'problem' he had presented; something which is not congruent with my philosophy of practice (Lindsay et al., 2007). On the other

hand, the father had acknowledged some broader challenges his daughter was experiencing (moving home/countries/schools and the relationship with her coach), which I felt could be underpinning the ‘mental block’ and so felt comfortable progressing to understand CS’s experiences further. Despite this and perhaps because of the anxiety I was experiencing, I read a number of journal articles related to gymnasts experiencing ‘mental blocks’ and the psychological skills that they utilised to overcome them. Some of the techniques that these athletes were utilising included imagery, self-talk and pre-performance routines (Chase, Magyar, & Drake, 2005; Howell, 2017; Magyar & Chase, 1996; Martin, Polster, Jackson, Greenleaf, & Jones, 2008). However, I was also mindful not to approach the intake and needs analysis with preconceived ideas that would prevent me from understanding CS’s experiences. Moreover, I was aware that the challenges that the father had presented might not have provided a complete insight into the situation or may not have represented CS’s experiences at all. In line with my philosophy of practice, I was consistently aware of the broader issues CS could be facing and I was particularly aware of the challenge that moving away from home could have on an athlete, especially an athlete so young (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016). Moreover, these critical moments throughout an athlete’s career, are often accompanied by a significant amount of anxiety, as the individual’s identity is challenged (Nesti et al., 2012; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) and so a more holistic approach to service delivery needed to be considered here.

With CS’s upcoming competition in mind and her father’s expression of a desire for a ‘quick-fix’, I felt I could not justify separating the intake and needs analysis and so I combined these two elements together in my first session with CS. Separating these two elements of consultancy can be beneficial, although it is not uncommon for them to become blurred throughout the consultancy experience (Keegan, 2016). The primary purpose of the intake session is to build a relationship with the client, whilst allowing the practitioner to

provide an honest and transparent overview of their philosophy of practice and any ethical considerations (scope of practice etc.) so the client can make an informed decision about whether to continue their engagement with the consultancy process. The needs analysis session is primarily designed to gain a complete understanding of the experiences of the client and agree on a primary aim for the consultancy process, to help inform the practitioner when developing an appropriate intervention.

Intake and Needs Analysis

Given the ethical considerations of working with a junior athlete, ethical approval was obtained from both CS and her parents before beginning the consultancy process. Moreover, based on the age of the client, I had decided that it would be appropriate for the session to take place in CS's home. I wanted to ensure that CS felt comfortable to improve the relationship I could develop with her and the efficacy of the work we could achieve together. However, I had little or no control over the environment I was entering into and so had to strongly consider whether or not the environment would be appropriate with regards confidentiality. Confidentiality is essential when working with all athletes and in this particular case was vital, as I wanted to understand CS's experiences, free from the influence of her parents. After meeting CS's parents, they showed me to the room where I'd be working with CS and thankfully respected the boundaries of confidentiality by leaving CS and I to begin the session alone. I began the session by explaining confidentiality to CS and reassured her that the content of our discussions would remain between the two of us if that is what she preferred. I also briefly highlighted my philosophy of practice; in a simple way she could comprehend and appreciate. Understandably, she seemed nervous and I was aware that my role initially was to make her feel more comfortable and to build a rapport with her based on trust (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). I achieved this by starting with a broad question, which she could answer comfortably and at her own pace: "...tell me about your journey, in

166 *and outside of sport, which has led you to this point*". CS began by discussing her
167 experiences of gymnastics at the age of seven, when it had been fun and something she
168 'loved' doing. However, she quickly progressed the session onto the main challenges she was
169 currently experiencing. Throughout the first session with CS, it became apparent, almost
170 instantly, that the challenges she was experiencing were broader than simply a 'mental block'
171 as her father had explained (see *Appendix: 'Case Report One'*). The family had recently
172 move to England to ensure CS was training at an elite gymnastics club, which meant she felt
173 under a lot of pressure to continuously train and compete at the highest level. It is often the
174 case that athletes feel compelled to carry on training because of the sacrifices their parents
175 have made throughout their career (Pinheiro et al., 2014). CS explained that in her previous
176 country, she had lived, trained and studied at a gymnastics school, which she found very
177 challenging as she missed her family and friends. At this point, at the age of 12, she had
178 stopped enjoying the sport and had not enjoyed it since. She experienced anxiety before every
179 training session and could not switch off from gymnastics as she trained 27 hours a week,
180 leading to it dominating her life (Pinheiro et al., 2014). She struggled to manage the demands
181 of both school and sport and so had little time or opportunity to develop friendships outside
182 of these environments (Tekavc, Wylleman, & Erpič, 2015). As a result of moving to a
183 different country, which required her to move both school and club, she felt she had very
184 little support from friends and coaches and at this point in the session she expressed her
185 feelings of isolation (Aquilina, 2013). She became very upset at several moments throughout
186 the session. She did not discuss the 'mental block' until I prompted her to do so 50 minutes
187 into the session and unsurprisingly, in comparison to the other challenges she was
188 experiencing, she did not seem overly concerned by it. As well as explaining her current
189 experiences, she had explained to me that she had worked with a Sport and Exercise
190 Psychologist in the past and had been taught breathing techniques and imagery. However, she

clearly expressed to me at this point that she had not felt that these techniques had been useful in improving her performance (Corlett, 1996). To conclude the session, CS and I discussed her aspirations as an athlete and how she felt I could help her achieve these goals in the future. Despite the challenges she was currently experiencing, she expressed that her long-term goal was to be an Olympic athlete. One step she wanted to take towards achieving this ultimate goal was to compete in the British Championships that were taking place next year. We agreed that during our next session(s) we would focus on three specific areas to help her achieve both of these goals: a) switching off from gymnastics when away from a training or competitive setting, b) reducing the anxiety she experienced before training and to begin enjoying the sport again and c) overcoming the ‘mental block’ she was experiencing.

Reflections Prior to the Development of an Intervention

It was clear after the first session that the psychological skills highlighted in the research, I had read prior to the session would be insufficient to support CS through her current experiences. It was also clear that there was a discrepancy between the challenges the father had presented, and the challenges CS had discussed (Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers, 2017). At this point what was not clear was whether this discrepancy was due to a lack of understanding or appreciation from the father of his daughter’s experiences, or whether CS had not communicated these challenges to her parents. Nevertheless, at this point, with regards the development of an intervention, the expectations of CS were different from the expectations of her father, which raised the question; who was the client? Ultimately, the client was CS, but her father was paying me for my services and perhaps had a different set of expectations regarding the aim of my support. Despite understanding the needs of CS and my own personal philosophy, I felt anxiety and pressure, based on the father’s expectation of a ‘solution’ and as a result considered the use of mental skills training alongside a more counselling based approach. However, after reflecting further and engaging in critical

discussion with my supervisor, I came to the conclusion that any attempt to implement mental skills training would be insufficient in overcoming the more holistic challenges CS was experiencing and I was also very aware of how working in this way, given my philosophy of practice, would create a sense of incongruence (Lindsay et al., 2007). I was also mindful to gain a better understanding of whether CS had communicated any of these challenges with her parents, as based on my discussion with her father, he did not seem to be aware of any of the experiences she had discussed.

Developing the Intervention

Having reached the conclusion that mental skills training would be insufficient in dealing with CS's broader challenges (Corlett, 1996), I adopted a counselling-based approach to our second session together, underpinned by the core principles of Humanistic psychology. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of some of the more holistic challenges she was experiencing and provide CS with a safe environment in which to discuss these challenges. Due to time constraints and the amount of challenges CS had discussed in our first session together, I felt as though we had not had the opportunity to go into much detail about the specific challenges she was experiencing, which more than likely occurred as a direct result of me attempting to combine the intake and needs analysis sessions. This highlights the potential benefits of separating these two sessions during the consultancy process. Taking time to conduct a thorough intake ensures the practitioner develops an effective relationship with the client, which has a direct influence on the detail the client is willing to divulge in the subsequent needs analysis. The more detail the client is willing to provide, the more likely the intervention developed will meet the needs of the client. In addition to wanting to gain a better understanding of CS's experiences, I was also mindful that CS's parents did not know what their daughter was experiencing. Hence, the following session acted as a second, more detailed needs analysis, whilst also allowing CS to shape the intervention herself (regarding

241 the decision to include her parents). The suggestion to include the parents in the consultancy
242 process was initially discussed between my supervisor and I. My supervisor had recently
243 experienced a similar applied experience and found that including the parents in the process
244 had been successful in supporting the client through their challenges. However, I wanted to
245 ensure that CS was comfortable with this.

246 I decided to utilise the report I had written from our first session as the basis for the
247 discussion in the second session. I did this for three reasons. Firstly, I wanted to ensure I had
248 fully understood CS's experiences as she had described them and demonstrate that I had a
249 genuine interest and understanding of these experiences. Secondly, I wanted to give her an
250 opportunity to change or add anything to these experiences, which would stimulate further
251 discussion between us. Finally, I wanted to give CS an opportunity to reflect on what we had
252 discussed and allow her to consider the inclusion of her parents as the foundation for our next
253 session together. Using the report from the previous session worked well. CS seemed to be
254 more comfortable with me in the second session and so expanded on each of the challenges
255 she had mentioned. However, providing CS with the opportunity to reflect made her
256 noticeably upset and concluded in us having the following exchange:

257 **CS:** *Begins to cry* 'I don't know why I'm so sad'

258 **NW:** 'What is it you think is making you sad?'

259 **CS:** 'Speaking to you has made me realise for the first time that I don't do anything other
260 than gymnastics'

261 At this point, CS also re-emphasised the enormous pressure she was under from her
262 parents, given that they had moved country to ensure she was training at an elite level and we
263 both agreed that her parents needed to hear what she was experiencing (see *Appendix: 'Case*
264 *Report Two*'). CS expressed how she found it difficult to communicate with her parents at

times, because of their consistent focus on gymnastics. She mostly chose not to discuss her experiences of gymnastics, because she wanted to switch off when not training or competing. However, she agreed that telling her parents what she was experiencing would help her overcome some of her challenges in the future. In fact, she was noticeably relieved at the suggestion of involving her parents. We then discussed what options CS had in relation to how to communicate most effectively with her parents. I presented CS with three options (which my supervisor had suggested in our previous conversation): a) for her to speak to her parents without me present, b) for us to talk to her parents together or c) for me to talk to her parents on her behalf. We agreed that it would be best if we both spoke to her parents in the next session, which would allow CS the opportunity to discuss her experiences of the sport, particularly how she felt pressure and anxiety due to the fact that the whole family had moved to England for the purposes of her training.

The Intervention

The third session included both CS and her parents and was designed to form the initial part of the intervention; facilitating communication between all members of the family. To achieve this, I was aware that I needed to create an environment where everyone's voice could be heard. This was vital given that CS had already highlighted how she struggled to communicate with her parents. It is often the case that young athletes, who are part of a sporting culture, do not communicate effectively, through fear it will be viewed negatively (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Furthermore, it can often be the case that the high level of commitment involved with elite sport and the facilitating role parents adopt, might inhibit young athletes from disclosing their experiences (Stirling, 2011) and it is particularly common within gymnastics for the athletes to develop a 'code of silence' (Pinheiro et al., 2014). Hence it was essential for me to build a strong rapport with the family, based on trust and respect, to ensure the intervention would be effective (Greenless, 2009). Moreover, I was

290 also unsure of how CS's parents might react and so needed to consider their emotional
291 response and psychological well-being as well. Therefore, I began the session by reinforcing
292 the boundaries of confidentiality and outlining my role within the session, which would be to
293 create a safe environment, facilitate communication and allow the family to discuss potential
294 solutions for the future. Everyone seemed satisfied with the supportive role I would adopt and
295 so I encouraged CS to begin the session by telling her parents what she had been
296 experiencing. CS immediately got upset, but courageously described her experiences to her
297 parents. Her father's immediate reaction was to hug CS, but his body language gave me an
298 insight into his thoughts, and he seemed to be extremely disappointed with what he was
299 hearing. It was also clear that he was taken aback by what he had heard and instantly began
300 expressing his thoughts on what his daughter had said. His opinion centred around how
301 disappointing it would be if she did not continue with the sport and how she would make the
302 whole family proud if she carried on; "...*think about how good it'll be when we can come*
303 *and watch you perform*". Research has found that whilst parents do want their child to enjoy
304 the sport, in a lot of cases, they also want them to become Olympic Champions and so
305 dedicate a lot of their own lives in achieving this goal (Smits, Jacobs, & Knoppers, 2017) to
306 the extent that it 'becomes a significant part of their identity' (Donnelly, 1997: p.399).
307 Moreover, parents are often unaware of the negative impact elite sport can have on their
308 child's well-being and psychological development (Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003). This was
309 definitely evident through the father's response as he also began discussing the sacrifices, he
310 had made within his own childhood to achieve his successes within his life. Whilst doing this,
311 he began to belittle CS's experiences, by making statements such as; "*It would be a shame to*
312 *quit gymnastics just because you want to see your friends*". He also did not seem to fully
313 understand the magnitude of what was being discussed, as he continued to return to the
314 'mental block', which left CS visibly confused and frustrated.

Reflections throughout the intervention. It was becoming apparent to me at this point in the session that the father was not fully understanding or acknowledging the experiences of CS. His lack of empathy towards his daughter and continuous reference to his own needs and experiences was evoking a negative emotional response in myself. I had developed a strong relationship with CS over the last two sessions and so felt protective of her. She was noticeably upset and frustrated at her father's response and I got the sense that she regretted telling her parents how she felt. Because of this, I had a strong sense that I was failing her. I also could not understand how her own father did not seem to be taking a similar protective approach in relation to his daughter's experiences. These emotions and thoughts, in the moment, led to an almost tangible distance between me and CS's parents. Upon reflection, I needed to revisit the question of 'who is the client', when preparing for the family session. Earlier, it had been clear that CS was the client. However, by including CS's parents as a key part of the consultancy process, I should have spent more time considering the impact this could have had on the relationships and dynamics of the support I was providing. Within applied sport psychology delivery, it is not always clear who the client is (Haberl & Peterson, 2006) and without enough consideration I approached the third session in a similar way to the first two sessions (CS was the client). Because of this, when CS's father did not respond in a supportive manner, my line of questioning moved from being supportive and exploratory, to emotive and potentially directive at times. However, I was aware of this in the moment and attempted to return to my facilitative role, by encouraging CS's mother to provide her thoughts on the situation, in the hope that she would provide more of a balanced view and show some empathy towards her daughter's situation.

Disappointingly, CS's mother reinforced everything CS's father had been saying. However, I got the sense that this was not how she truly felt. It was clear to see by observing the dynamic of the parent's relationship, that the father was viewed as the authority figure. At

340 this point within the intervention, I reinforced how important it was for everyone to speak
341 openly and honestly. CS's mother then began to discuss her own experiences, which were
342 very similar to her daughter's experiences. She discussed how challenging the move to
343 England had been for her and expressed how she would often experience severely low
344 moods, due to having no friends or support. However, frustratingly, she did not seem to
345 demonstrate any empathy to her daughter, who was experiencing the same challenges, with
346 the added challenge of training and competing 27 hours a week in the highly pressured
347 environment of elite sport. With my frustrations growing, alongside the feeling I had failed
348 CS, I changed my approach to the intervention. I actively encouraged the family to begin
349 thinking about possible changes that could be made that would help CS through this difficult
350 period. Initially CS's father actively encouraged CS to reduce her focus and efforts towards
351 her schoolwork. This reinforced the idea that his identity and focus was solely directed
352 towards his daughter becoming an elite athlete and led to me becoming more frustrated and
353 despondent. Eventually, with further guidance from myself, as a family they agreed to
354 improve lines of communication (something CS was going to take a leading role in) and
355 create 'protected family time', which they would utilise to watch a film each week and switch
356 off completely from gymnastics (See *Appendix 'Case Report Three'*). To me, these were very
357 small steps that I felt would not make much difference in the long-term. However, at least it
358 was an acknowledgement that something needed to change!

359 At the end of the session, I asked the family what they wanted from me in the
360 following session, in the hope that this would provide me with an opportunity to continue my
361 support of CS and perhaps educate the family further on how to overcome these challenges.
362 CS's father immediately returned to the 'mental block', which further highlighted his lack of
363 empathy or understanding towards the situation and potentially provided more of an insight
364 into the pressure he was under from CS's coach (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). I attempted to

explain the potential link that existed between performance and well-being and how by focusing on these broader challenges, CS might be in a better position to overcome the ‘mental block’ (Brady & Maynard, 2010; Friesen & Orlick, 2010). However, CS’s father did not seem to appreciate this response and ended the session by stating “...*we’ll contact you if we want you to come back*”. This response reinforces the different approaches CS’s father and I had adopted towards the situation. Despite hearing all the challenges his daughter was experiencing, CS’s father was still focused on overcoming the ‘mental block’. Based on my philosophy of practice (long-term holistic support of the person), overcoming the ‘mental block’ was not the priority, which made it almost impossible to continue the consultancy process due to these different perspectives of the situation.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Intervention

Unsurprisingly, in the weeks that followed, CS’s father did not ask me to return, despite CS’s mother clearly expressing her desire for me to come back again. Therefore, I did not have an opportunity to gain any objective or subjective feedback on the effectiveness of the intervention (although not being asked to return is a pretty conclusive insight into how CS’s father had evaluated the intervention!). To better understand the potential effectiveness of the intervention, I needed to rely on my own reflections of the consultancy experience.

My lack of experience in sports other than football made this consultancy process difficult to begin with. My awareness of this lack of experience prior to the first session with CS had made me unusually anxious, which led to an unnatural and unauthentic meeting between CS and me. Furthermore, my past experiences of working for a professional organisation meant I had had limited experiences of engaging with parents in the way I had with CS’ father, which perhaps impeded my effectiveness with this particular case. With regards the different perspectives CS’s father and I had adopted, I feel I should have spent more time discussing the relationship that exists between well-being and performance and

390 how focusing on the broader challenges could have supported CS in overcoming the ‘mental
391 block’. Perhaps taking the time to educate the family on my approach to service-delivery,
392 before the third session, would have allowed them to better understand how I was attempting
393 to support their daughter. However, it was clear throughout this consultancy experience,
394 based on my understanding of the literature, my theoretical orientation, and the needs of CS,
395 that the ‘mental block’ was not the priority. Despite this, in the weeks following the third
396 session, I could not help but feel I had failed CS. She was noticeably upset and frustrated at
397 the end of our third session together and without the invitation to return, I could no longer
398 support her. After texting CS’s father and reinforcing that I was available if needed in the
399 future (with no response) I considered offering my support for free. I felt a strong duty of care
400 towards CS and was frustrated that this support relied on her father, as the gatekeeper,
401 inviting me back. However, I decided not to do this, as ultimately it was not the money that
402 was the issue, it was the difference in expectations regarding the outcome of the consultancy
403 process that was the problem and this would have prevented me from developing the right
404 relationships with CS’s parents, leaving any future intervention pointless.

405 After a few weeks had passed, I was able to reflect on the consultancy process without
406 being influenced by the emotions I had experienced. Whilst I was still disappointed that the
407 intervention had ended so abruptly, I was able to reflect positively on the experience. As a
408 trainee practitioner, I was able to successfully build a strong relationship with a young female
409 athlete competing in a sport I had no experience of working within. All my experience, prior
410 to this client, had been working with adult male professional footballers and coaches and so
411 successfully building a strong relationship with a client of a different demographic allowed
412 me to demonstrate diversity in my training to become a chartered Sport and Exercise
413 Psychologist. Moreover, I was able to work congruently, in line with my core values and
414 beliefs (Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004), despite a number of external pressures

and doubts I had had at the time. This sense of congruence led to me experiencing my most positive consultancy experience to date (during and after the second session with CS). I was able to create a safe environment for CS to explore her experiences, which resulted in her developing more self-awareness and realising things about her life that she had not realised before. Following the second session, CS thanked me for my support and this genuine heart-felt appreciation reinforced why I had dedicated so much of my life to this profession! I am confident, that if given the opportunity, I would have been able to successfully support CS through this critical moment in her life and consequently had a positive impact on both performance and well-being.

Whilst there are a number of positives to take away from this experience, there are aspects of the consultancy process I would change if given the opportunity again. To begin with, I needed to spend more time considering my relationship with CS's parents. The moment I introduced them as part of the intervention, the dynamic of the service delivery changed. At this point, did they become the client as well as CS? I would argue that CS was still the client primarily and her parents were there to support her. However, by adopting this approach and not getting the supportive response I had expected, it created a gap between CS, her parents, and me, which ultimately led to me not being asked to return. Perhaps if I had taken more time to build a relationship with CS's parents, I would have been given another opportunity to return and support their daughter. Moreover, I needed to consider my relationship with CS more closely. Why did I feel so protective of her? I have always felt an emotional 'attachment' to my clients, which I believe comes through empathetic understanding. However, my emotional response to CS was a lot stronger than previous clients. Upon reflection, I believe that, because CS was a young female athlete, I may have viewed her as more vulnerable than some of my previous clients and this may have fostered the idea that I needed to adopt more of a protective role with her. Feeling strong emotions

towards a client can be a sign of countertransference (Winstone & Gervis, 2006), which can occur when the client evokes thoughts and feelings in the practitioner that originate from a previous relationship. It is not uncommon for practitioners to ‘want to save’ their clients (Anderson & Williams-Rice, 1996), which is exactly how I would describe my emotional response to this consultancy experience with CS. With time I have come to understand that my identity as an uncle to a young niece may have been the underpinning cause to this countertransference with CS. It is vital that applied practitioners become aware of the practitioner-athlete relationship to improve service-delivery (Petitpas, Danish, & Giges, 1999), but more importantly to ensure safe ethical practice (Rowan & Jacobs, 2002).

Conclusion

This reflective case study highlights a number of challenges experienced by a trainee Sport and Exercise Psychologist at the start of his BPS Stage Two journey. The applied practitioner had to build a relationship with a client in an unfamiliar sport, withstand challenges to his philosophy of practice, demonstrate sound ethical practice when working with a junior athlete, attempt to include the parents in the intervention to improve support for the client, closely consider the concept of countertransference, and overcome the anxiety associated with this unsuccessful consultancy experience. This case study highlights the complexities of working as an applied sport psychology practitioner in elite sport and addresses how these experiences can contribute towards the overall development of the practitioner.

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Appendix

Case Report One

Date: 26/10/17

The purpose of our first session together, was for us to get to know each other and begin building a relationship that would allow us to work together effectively moving forwards. We started with a timeline exercise, where I asked you to give me an overview of your journey, both in and outside of sport, up until the current day.

You explained to me that you had started gymnastics at the age of seven and up until the age of 12 you really enjoyed the sport. At the age of 12 you enrolled at a gymnastics school, which you explained was similar to a boarding school. You trained and studied there full-time (5 times a week) and it was at this point, for the first time, that you stopped enjoying gymnastics. The first six months in particular were very challenging for you, as you missed your family and friends. You have recently (in the last 2 months) moved to England for your previous home, where you had lived for 9 years previously. You described this move as less disruptive than previous occasions where you have moved house and country.

We then began discussing your current experiences of gymnastics. You explained to me that you train 27 hours a week and that gymnastics takes up a lot of your time. You often experience anxiety immediately before training. You have been experiencing this anxiety for the last two years, since you started training at the school at the age of 12. You explained to me that this anxiety is reduced when you have a better idea of what you are doing in training and you have more of a set routine. At the moment, because of the short time you have been back in England, you haven't developed a relationship with your coach, which means her training seems unpredictable to you. You also began to describe the differences between your previous coach and your current coach. One of the differences that you described was that your previous coach was more likely to get 'angry' if individuals didn't perform or train well, whereas your current coach was more likely to be 'disappointed'. When I asked if you felt she was currently disappointed with you, you seemed unsure. You also seemed unsure about whether or not you were able to compete in the British National Championships, which was one of your goals for the future.

You also explained to me that you struggle to switch off from gymnastics. You added to this by telling me that you had made the decision to attend training even when experiencing an injury that was preventing you from physically training yourself. The only times you get an opportunity to switch off from gymnastics are when you are at school (although that can be challenging as well), when you watch TV (and YouTube) and when reading. You told me how you liked reading Harry Potter and how you liked "getting lost in that world".

It was really interesting to hear you talk about your hobbies outside of gymnastics at this point. You seemed more relaxed and upbeat when talking about your passion for reading. When we discussed the idea of working together to help find ways for you to switch off from gymnastics, you seemed excited. You also agreed that switching off from gymnastics would actually be beneficial to your performances as an athlete. We agreed that this weekend (your trip to the Lake District) would be a good time for you to think about different that you could switch off from gymnastics.

Finally we discussed your current experiences of a ‘mental block’ on the uneven bars. You have experienced a mental block before on the vault that took you 6 months to overcome. You explained that you couldn’t get passed the block on the previous occasion because of the pressure of the upcoming competition. However, once the competition had passed and the pressure was reduced you were able to perform the move again.

Do you think the current pressure you are experiencing might be contributing towards the ‘block’ you are having now? We can discuss this in more detail in our next session together.

Additional Notes:

You have worked with a sport psychology practitioner before, in a group setting. He taught you how to use breathing techniques and imagery. You didn’t feel that these techniques were very helpful. However, you did describe how you use imagery before you go to sleep at night.

Your aspirations are to compete in the British National Championships in one years’ time and your ultimate goal is to compete in the Olympics. We agreed that I could help you achieve these goals by doing the following:

1. Helping you switch off from gymnastics
2. Help reduce the anxiety you experience before training
3. Help get you passed the ‘mental block’ you are experiencing.

Case Report Two

Date: 02/11/17

In our second session together we spent some time going through the discussion we had had the week before. This was to ensure I had understood your current situation properly and to give you an opportunity to change or add more detail to any areas you felt I had missed or misunderstood. By reflecting on last week’s session and going over the ‘homework’ you had completed, we were able to go into more detail, which I’ve highlighted below:

You discussed the idea of ‘belonging’. For you it is important that you feel you belong at the gymnastics club where you currently train. Even though there isn’t anyone at the club that is the same age as you, you get along with all the girls in your group (both younger and older). You feel your relationship with your coach could be better, but you don’t want to become over familiar with her at this point. In order to improve your relationship with your coach, you’d like to learn more about her, but at the same time, you’d like to maintain certain boundaries. You described the club that you currently train at as more fun when comparing it to your previous club. At your previous club you wouldn’t do anything outside of gymnastics, whereas at your current club they do more activities that don’t just focus on gymnastics.

Considering that you have only been training at the club a couple of months, you seem to be developing good relationships with the other gymnasts and over time these relationships will continue to improve. Remember that what you are currently experiencing is completely normal and the other girls at the club could be experiencing similar things.

You've admitted that the relationship you have with your coach could be better, but as long as both you and your coach are working towards improving it, it will improve with time.

At this point, I asked you the question, "*What does success look like to you*" and your response was "*being in the right place, being around the right people and not being injured*".

This is an extremely mature response to this question and again highlights the importance of the relationships that you develop with the people around you. It might be helpful to start thinking about who you want/need to develop better relationships with and how you can begin to improve these relationships over time.

At this point of the session, we both discussed what we felt were the most important parts of last week's session and agreed that the following three areas were where we should focus our attention:

- Your lack of enjoyment for gymnastics
- The anxiety you feel before training
- Not being able to switch off when you're away from gymnastics.

You became a little upset at this point in the session and you described that the reason you were upset was because this was the first time you'd discussed this with anyone before and it had made you realise that you don't do anything outside of gymnastics. You explained that in order for you to enjoy gymnastics again, you'd want to train less (3 times a week).

You also described how you feel a lot of pressure at the moment because your family had moved over to England specifically so you could train. We agreed, after a little discussion, that your parents needed to hear what you were currently experiencing. You admitted that you don't usually like to talk about the challenges you experience and when asked by your parents about gymnastics, you choose not to go into any detail because you want to switch off from the sport.

We then spoke about what we wanted to achieve in our next session with your parents and we agreed that we would focus on telling them the following:

- Your experiences in your previous country. Especially how challenging the first 6 months were for you, because you missed your family and friends
- Your current experiences. Specifically, how you feel pressure and anxiety, because of the fact that the family have all moved to England for the purposes of your training.

You want your parents to know your experiences, because you think they want to know and it'll help all of you moving forwards. You want to be able to choose when you do and don't

692 speak about gymnastics. There are some occasions where you would benefit from talking
693 about it, whereas sometimes you would rather switch off from the sport and concentrate on
694 other things.

697 **Case Report Three**

698 **Date:** 16/11/17

699 Session three was the first session that included both you and your parents. I began the
700 session by explaining the boundaries of confidentiality and expressing my appreciation to
701 your parents for respecting confidentiality up until this point. I also provided some detail
702 about my philosophy of practice and how my role in today's session was to facilitate open,
703 non-judgmental communication between each family member. You then began the session by
704 communicating the messages we had discussed in the previous session:

- 705 • Your experiences at the 'gymnastics school'. Especially how challenging the first six
706 months were for you, because you missed your family and friends
- 707 • Your current experiences. Specifically, how you feel pressure and anxiety, because of
708 the fact that the family have all moved to Liverpool for the purposes of your training.
- 709 • Your current lack of enjoyment for the sport, your inability to switch off and your
710 lack of engagement in activities away from gymnastics.

711 Your parents then discussed some of their concerns, specifically:

- 712 • How it would be a shame for you to quit gymnastics after all the time and effort you
713 had put into the sport
- 714 • How you could achieve great things and make the family proud.
- 715 • How they were willing to support you, by allowing your friends to come over on her
716 days off.
- 717 • How they wanted you to communicate more effectively with them.

718 In the future, the family have agreed to:

- 719 • Consider their communication with each other. You will initiate the communication
720 with your parents when you feel comfortable to do so.

721
722 **Part of the challenge in the past has been that you didn't want to communicate, as**
723 **you wanted to switch off as soon as she got home. However, your parents want you**
724 **to communicate, as they feel excluded given the club's no parent policy.**

- 725
726 • Create some 'protected time' throughout the week where the family can engage in an
727 activity that will allow you to switch off from the sport.