

# The Challenges of Sport Psychology Delivery in Elite and Professional Sport: Reflections From Experienced Sport Psychologists

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The challenges encountered by sport psychologists operating within elite and professional sports teams have arguably been inadequately considered (Nesti, 2010). It has been suggested that this may be due to the inaccessibility of elite team environments (Eubank, Nesti, & Cruickshank, 2014; Nesti, 2010). The purpose of this research was to examine the challenges facing practitioners who operate in elite environments and to illuminate how these were experienced. Qualitative interviews with six experienced applied sport psychologists were conducted and a narrative themed analysis undertaken. Four main themes emerged as most prevalent and meaningful: challenges to congruence, a broader role: managing multiple relationships, the influence of elite sport cultures, and surviving and thriving were presented in narrative form. Practitioners provided experiential insight into how specific challenges were understood and dealt with, and how they are able to provide an effective service while managing themselves and the demands of the environment.

**Keywords:** elite sport, sport psychology, challenges, congruence

The challenges faced by sport psychologists working in elite team settings have received limited attention in the academic literature (Nesti, 2010). This neglect is related to a number of interconnected reasons. It is noted that sport psychology has typically been better received within lower levels of sport (as opposed to elite levels) (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) and that elite environments are notoriously hard to access (Eubank et al., 2014; Nesti, 2010). Perhaps reflective of the reduced opportunity to examine elite sport environments, sport psychology scholars have historically tended to focus upon intraindividual mental states and the corresponding application of mental skills techniques, which again, is more usually representative of sport psychology delivery in nonelite settings (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Nesti, 2010). These factors have arguably contributed to the minimal focus upon the work of sport psychologists within elite and professional teams. As a result, it seems as though the challenges that sport psychologists experience in elite sport are often examined in isolation; either in relation to a particular issue or topic (e.g., Haberl & Peterson's (2006) study of ethical challenges at an Olympic games) or as part of an individual's own reflections (e.g., Knowles, Katz, & Gilbourne, 2012; Nesti, 2010). Rarely have the challenges encountered by

sport psychologists operating at the elite team level been studied directly, comprehensively, and as a topic worthy of consideration in its own right. Consequently, the types of adversity facing those practitioners operating at the elite level are at times only implied and often appear in the literature almost by chance.

It is observed that "effective practice is made significantly more difficult without a true understanding of the workspace and its surrounding landscape." (Eubank et al., 2014, p.30). A lack of scholarly work in elite domains may therefore be contributing to individuals not being either suitably trained (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009) or supported (Fletcher, Rumbold, Tester, & Coombes, 2011; Nesti, 2004) to deal with certain aspects of elite sport consultancy. As such, the purpose of this research is to examine the challenges that are of most significance to the sport psychologists who operate in elite sport, and to explore these challenges in a way that accurately reflects practitioner experience of working in these environments.

## Sport Psychology and Elite Sport Challenges

Typically, the criteria of what actually constitutes "elite" in sport are not well defined. This study aligned with the recommendations of Hanton, Fletcher, and Coughlan, (2005) who stated that elite athletes include those that are current national squad members and/or perform at the highest level in their sport. An important, yet neglected

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point is that this definition of elite can occasionally be stretched to encompass youth and development athletes/squads and nonfirst team levels. Under current definitions, these populations may still arguably be elite, but in actuality it is a level of sport that is different and usually far removed from the most professional environments and cultures within elite sport that invest heavily in terms of resources to elicit high performance (Nesti, 2010). For example, Olympic teams and English Premier League (EPL) football clubs benefit from significant financial investment and generated revenues (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Gilmore & Gilson, 2007). Generally this access to capital has resulted in the employment of vast numbers of staff (coaches, scientific and technical experts, and organizational personnel), the development of state of the art equipment and training facilities, and the deployment of sophisticated commercial, organizational, and strategic arms (Fletcher & Arnold, 2011; Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Nesti, 2010), creating large, complex environments that operate not only as sports teams, but as highly structured business entities as well (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Nesti, 2010).

Nesti (2004) suggested that the challenges faced by sport psychologists working at this professionalized level of elite sport are often different from those encountered at lower levels and in nonprofessional team sport settings. In such high performance environments, Eubank and colleagues (2014) assert these challenges to include: building relationships and establishing credibility with a number of different individuals and groups (e.g., athletes, coaches, specialist staff and technical experts, and management and leadership professionals), handling ethical challenges and confidentiality issues relating to information sharing and working with multiple clients, dealing with interdepartmental communication issues and conflicts, understanding and working within cultures that are often volatile and unpredictable while resisting pressures to conform to the demands of the culture, undertaking a role that involves organizational psychology work and culture shaping practices, and pressures to continually evidence efficacy of support.

Of course, the challenges described above are arguably endemic to all levels of sport, rather than being confined to elite domains only. However, Eubank and colleagues (2014) contend that the nature of the challenges within elite settings are shaped by environmental and cultural features that are common in elite sport (e.g., large number of employees, cultures that are volatile, unpredictable, and incredibly demanding). Supportingly, it is well documented that sport psychologists working with elite teams must regularly operate in environments characterized as stressful, pressurized, highly competitive and success obsessed (e.g., Brady & Maynard, 2010; Nesti, 2010; Reid et al., 2004; Williams & Andersen, 2012; Woodman & Hardy, 2001). Though these conditions are also not the preserve of elite sport, it is asserted that they are more typically encountered in elite environments, which are characteristically more complex, fast-paced, ruthless, and prone to more intense levels of social and

political tension than other sport settings (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Eubank, et al., 2014). Perhaps then, it is more accurate to say that the challenges practitioners face across sport settings (i.e., elite v nonelite) are not inherently different per-se; but that the magnitude, range, and complexity of the challenges will often be very different. Further, though many sport psychologists are rightly wary of claiming the definitiveness of their contribution to athlete performance, they are by association, whether they like it or not, implicated by the performances of the athletes whom they support (Brady & Maynard, 2010). Sport necessitates that there will be winners and losers, great performances and poor performances. This innate characteristic of competitive sport may affect the professional credibility, kudos and, ultimately, the personal and vocational security of the sport psychologist, especially at the elite level where the rewards for success are substantial and where there is little leeway for failure (Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013a; Nesti, 2010).

## Personalizing the Experience of Challenge

The recent study by Fletcher et al. (2011), although it did not study elite sport specifically, was much welcomed as it explored the demands placed on sport psychologists by examining applied practitioners' (as well as sport psychology academics') experience of organizational stress. Stressors neither strictly nor directly equate to challenges as such, but it is suggested that the stressors uncovered by Fletcher and colleagues do imply that the sport psychologist will inevitably face certain challenges due to specific aspects of their profession. Fletcher et al. (2011) confirmed stressors in five general dimensions: 'factors intrinsic to sport psychology' (e.g., workload), 'roles in the organization' (e.g., role ambiguity), 'sport relationships' and 'interpersonal demands' (e.g., lack of social support), 'career and performance development issues' (e.g., job insecurity), and 'organizational structure and climate of the profession' (e.g., culture and political environment). Although Fletcher and colleagues have provided a thorough overview of stressors directly associated with the work of the sport psychologist, their research tends to focus upon the frequency of the stressors encountered, rather than the perceived relevance and importance of them. However, it is important to emphasize that sport psychologists exist within environments not only as individuals who are skilled professionals but also as human beings. Although this human dimension sometimes seems to be forgotten about in the sport psychology literature, some examples of challenges that perhaps do more explicitly convey the more personalized elements of the sport psychologist experience includes the challenge of understanding one's personal and professional philosophy of practice (e.g., Poczwadowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004), operating in a manner that is congruent with this philosophy (Lindsay, Breckon, Thomas, & Maynard, 2007), working authentically

(Nesti, 2004), and dealing with difficult ethical issues and considerations (Haberl & Peterson, 2006).

Though such obviously personal examinations of challenges, in addition to much of the emerging reflective practice literature (e.g., Knowles et al., 2012), help to convey the human element of practitioner experience, the reality is that sport psychology delivery and its place, role, function, and/or influence may vary, and indeed be tested, depending on the sport, sporting culture, and the athletes and individuals who coexist within a particular environment. Challenges must then be thought of as multidetermined with neither the environment nor the individual solely determining the challenges that a sport psychologist will face, or how those challenges will be perceived. Such logic is rooted in models of stress perception (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Woodman & Hardy, 2001) that promote the role of both the environment and the individual in contributing to a person's appraisal of their situation. Therefore each practitioner, as both a skilled professional and human being, in conjunction with the nuances of the environment, provides the interface that gives each challenge particular meaning and significance.

This study aims to move beyond primarily descriptive findings and attempts to provide contextual depth by asking questions that help bring personal meaning and experiences into the foreground: which challenges were most important? Which were difficult to deal with and why? How were they dealt with? What were the personal impacts? Answers to these questions could help to more accurately capture the most challenging aspects of sport psychology delivery in elite sport environments, and illuminate practitioner experiences of operating in conditions that are often difficult. By focusing on the nature of challenges with reference to perceived meaning and importance, it is hoped that this study can at least partly begin to accurately convey sport psychologists' experiences of working within elite settings, and that these findings might resonate with other applied practitioners. Without this academic alignment to applied reality, academic courses may be inadequately preparing the next generation of applied sport psychologists. Ultimately, as a result of this, it is those who are supported by sport psychologists (i.e., athletes, and sport teams) that suffer due to a poorer, less informed provision of service.

## Methodology

### Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, careful consideration was taken by the primary researcher to seek out experienced sport psychologists who were suitably positioned to address the research questions. Purposeful sampling requires the researcher to establish the prerequisites for participant eligibility (Merriam, 1988). The issues of central importance in this instance were (a) participants were experienced applied sport psychologists (minimum 2 years post qualification. In the UK, post qualification constitutes firstly undertaking an accredited

master's degree in sport and exercise psychology, and the subsequent completion of 2 years of supervised practice, after which candidates are eligible to apply to the British Psychological Society (BPS) for chartered status and full membership of the Division of Sport and Exercise Psychology [One European based participant achieved qualification through their own countries' standards for chartered status. These are comparable with the route advocated by the BPS], and (b) had worked extensively within elite sport environments.

As discussed, the criteria of what actually constitutes elite is not well defined in sport psychology research. Reiterating alignment with Hanton and colleagues (2005) perspective that elite athletes are those that are current national squad members and/or perform at the highest level in their sport, sport environments (at least in British and European sport systems) were logically considered elite if they contained athletes of this level (e.g., Olympic or international squad members or top-level professional sports clubs). Recognizing that this definition can also be extended to include youth and development athletes/squads and nonfirst team levels, participants were recruited who had substantial experience of working in elite level sport teams that not only represented the highest level in a particular sport (i.e., adult/first team) but that were considered highly professionalized (i.e., access to and deployment of significant resources; for example, large support staff and network of experts and supported by considerable investment).

Six participants were recruited (4 male, 2 female) and all were experienced practitioners; the mean level of experience working as an applied sport psychologist was 16.7 years. Between them, the participants had extensive experience of working in elite sport environments with international athletes, squads, and teams. The group had attended dozens of World Championships and Olympic Games, and had substantial experience within top-level team sports such as English Premier League football, top-level European League football, and Premier League Rugby. All participants provided written informed consent.

### Procedure

Each participant was contacted by e-mail and given information pertaining to the nature of the study to gauge their interest in taking part. Specifically, they were told that the study focused upon the challenges faced by applied sport psychologists operating at the elite level of sport, and how these challenges are mediated by both professional skills and more personal elements such as practitioner philosophy of practice, values, and attitudes toward practitioner congruence and authenticity. Each participant took part in an open-ended qualitative interview at a place and time convenient to them. After the opening question, which asked practitioners to describe their entry into and experience of applied sport psychology at the elite level, a more open, informal and conversational approach was adopted to encourage each

participant to express themselves freely (Patton, 2002). In allowing participants to relay their personal and experiential journeys, the interviewer attempted to stay with the responses provided by participants and used probing questions to follow up and accrue further insight (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews lasted for a mean of 55 min and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim producing 153 double-spaced pages of data. Two interviews occurred face to face, in an environment comfortable for the participant, two interviews were conducted over Skype, and two took place via telephone.

## Data Analysis and Representation

A focus on the narratives of participants aligned with the stated aim of attending to the personal meaning of challenges, as narratives are likely to provide in-depth and subjective data (Jowett, 2008) that allows for the exploration of meaning and the lived experience of participants (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Accordingly, a narrative themed analysis was conducted whereby the primary researcher explored the narratives of each participant independently, but also sought key ideas, themes, and emerging patterns (Patton, 2002) that could structure the data and help to bind the larger narrative (“the challenges of sport psychology delivery in elite sport”) together. Transcripts were read and reread, and the digital recordings listened to a number of times to ensure familiarity with the data set. At this stage initial ideas and thoughts were recorded for each participants’ data as well as group data. The remaining analysis involved closely following a number of steps as advocated by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestions for thematic analysis; the transcripts were worked through and data coded into meaningful groups, sorted into potential themes that were based not solely on prevalence but also on insight that they could provide. Themes were then reviewed, refined, and combined into more meaningful categories before being allocated names that appropriately defined the thematic content. The themes were then subsequently arranged along with selected quotes to form a nonfiction narrative that acted to illuminate the voice of participants as well as give the research contextual depth (Mishler, 1986). Nine pseudonyms were created for the six participants to further protect participant identity.

## Trustworthiness

This study incorporated multiple procedures to ensure the trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the data. Patton (2002) suggested that triangulation provides credibility to qualitative research analysis and accordingly analyst triangulation was used, in that emergent themes were monitored and reviewed by two supervisory researchers. Qualitative rigor was also addressed by interviewing experienced sport psychologists from a wide range of elite sport environments, which acted to provide in-depth raw data that was used to drive the results (Patton, 2002). To further increase trustworthiness,

each participant was sent a copy of their transcript verbatim and given the opportunity to clarify, reflect, and expand on anything that they had said during the interview (Patton, 2002). Finally, while consensus validation techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002) were used to enhance trustworthiness, it is our belief that the reader should also be given the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the data in ways that are meaningful to them (Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantic, & Sparkes, 2001). This stance is consistent with the narrative approach adopted, in that narratives naturally invite the reader to interpret information from their own unique vantage point (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Such an approach is complimented by the extensive use of direct quotations that allows the reader to “empathize with, and immerse himself, or herself in, the participants’ perceptions.” (Fletcher & Hanton, 2003, p.180).

## Results

*It (Premier League Football) can be particularly brutal, much more so than many other environments that you might walk in to or face. For a sport psychologist actually walking into that environment, then I just think they have to be aware of that; aware of the challenges that might come and where they think they are. (Chris)*

A narrative analysis of the transcripts resulted in a final thematic structure (see Table 1) containing four major themes that described participant experience of the challenges they encountered when working in elite sport environments. These were: challenges to congruence, a broader role: managing multiple relationships, the influence of elite sport cultures, and surviving and thriving.

## Challenges to Congruence

Sport psychologists may be considered as operating congruently or authentically when they are “using a method, model, or technique that is aligned with or underpinned by their personal beliefs and values regarding applied practice” (Lindsay et al., p.337). The practitioners interviewed in this study were in agreement with the assertion that to deliver effective sport psychology, their personal philosophy (i.e., personal beliefs and values) must be congruent with their chosen methods of service delivery (Lindsay et al., 2007; Poczwadowski et al., 2004). Ben described the importance of “checking” that he was operating congruently, while also representing a popular view that practitioner congruence was not stable, but rather constantly evolving and influenced by both internal and external factors:

*You’re always checking that it’s the way that I’m working and the behaviour and actions that I’m taking on a day to day basis; how they fit, do they fit with your personal beliefs and values, sense of self?... In certain domains, it’s easier to maintain*

**Table 1 Major and Subthemes of Participants' Experiences of Challenges**

Major Theme	Subtheme
Challenges to Congruence	
A Broader Role: Managing Multiple Relationships	building and developing relationships handling sensitive information being a part and apart
The Influence of Elite Sport Cultures	ruthless pursuit of performance major tournaments and big games disruptive subcultures
Surviving and Thriving	knowing when to challenge how flexible do you get? developing self-awareness

*a higher level of congruence, and in others it's more difficult. . . .It changes as you grow as a human being. It changes on what's asked of you as a practitioner in different environments. It's moving constantly, but you're always trying to adapt and shift with it. (Ben)*

Ben's quote highlights the pervasive nature of congruence and captures how congruence was perceived as integral to participant experiences of other major challenges. Challenges to congruence was therefore considered not only a prominent theme in itself, but also one that emerged and served as the background and context against which participants experienced other challenges within the elite environment. Consequently, it was our view that "challenges to congruence" could be more accurately represented if interwoven with the other main themes so as to reinforce its relatedness to these themes as well as its centrality to participants' experience of challenges.

### **A Broader Role: Managing Multiple Relationships**

This theme emerged from practitioner descriptions of elite sport environments. These descriptions were also consistent with assertions in the sport psychology literature suggesting that the number of support staff and highly qualified experts employed by elite sport teams has expanded considerably beyond what is typically encountered in nonelite and less wealthy sport settings (Gilmore & Gilson, 2007; Nesti, 2010; Reid, et al., 2004). Reflecting this growth, participants emphasized that the role of the sport psychologist in elite domains has developed/is developing into a challenging hybrid role where one-to-one intervention with athletes must be supplemented by a provision of service that extends to the multiple clients (i.e., large number of athletes, coaches, sport science and technical staff, and organizational personnel) that inhabit the elite sport environment (Moore, 2003; Nesti, 2010), and that includes a greater contribution to organizational and macro-level functioning (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009;

Nesti, 2010). Subthemes within this major theme included building and developing multiple relationships, handling sensitive information, and being a part of the team while also remaining apart.

**Building and Developing Multiple Relationships.** Tom explained how developing multiple relationships was essential to being able to provide the wider, more dynamic service that is often expected from the sport psychologist in modern day elite sport:

*Practitioners can work organizationally, culturally, within the dynamics, within the training environment, then competition on- to-one. . . .So the role, it flexes a lot and you have to flex with it. . . . But I can't do that without a good relationship with those people. . . . You've got to be able to get the relationships and be able to build relationships at so many different levels. I have to be able to have a discussion with an athlete who left school aged ten and with someone who holds two PhD's and is in charge of something like £500 million. (Tom)*

Conversely, failure to sustain these same relationships was widely regarded as detrimental to the sport psychologists' ability to operationalize across the environment and could ultimately jeopardize the tenure of the sport psychologist. Ben explained:

*If you can have the trust of all those people, then the influence you can have in a sport is huge, but if you start losing people - if you lose the performance director you can't work organizationally. If you lose the head coach then you can't work in competition. If you lose the multidisciplinary team you're limited to just doing direct face-to-face contact with the athletes. If you lose the athletes they'll have you out! (Ben)*

Tom also described how in performance-focused environments, the ability to cultivate relationships was also invariably linked to the ability to demonstrate value and evidence of worth to a number of key individuals:

*The challenge is that different people will take different evidence for you having made a difference . . . I know for me, it was two cases that really highlighted to the performance director that I'd made a difference. . . . But if I hadn't built the relationships and just been in the environment and around all the time, then maybe I wouldn't have had the chance. (Tom)*

Somewhat paradoxically, Tom conveyed that he felt that he might not have had the opportunity to display value without having developed the relationships that allowed him to be in a position to demonstrate impact. This is suggestive (at least for Tom) of a symbiotic relationship between relationship building and evidencing worth.

**Handling Sensitive Information.** When pressed on what the hardest aspect of working as a sport psychologist in a top-level sport environment was, Will, one of the most experienced practitioners interviewed, assuredly responded that it was the delicate balancing act that occurred when managing relationships with all the members of the environment:

*The hardest thing is to keep all those relationships positive but ethical. . . . it's having a process and the values that allow you to navigate through that system still feeling that you have the athlete, and yet you can still go ahead and do something positive that's going to help not only the athlete, but the team. (Will)*

Critical to the point that Will makes, is that in elite sport team environments the sport psychologist is managing more than just the traditional psychologist-athlete relationship. As a result of operating within a larger and more complex relationship network, practitioners in elite settings are often charged with handling sensitive information that may be regarded as important to (and possibly demanded by) different groups (e.g., athletes, managers and coaches, sport scientists, agents, organizational personnel). Alongside Will's suggestion that this task required serious attention to codes of conduct and personal values, Ben asserted that the sport psychologist must also constantly *sense*, and then attend to the status of these key relationships to more effectively (and ethically) handle important information.

**Being a Part and Apart.** A degree of detachment was proposed to be imperative in establishing the kind of relationship that enables the sport psychologist to gain the trust of *multiple* clients and work more broadly across the elite sport environment. Will reflected on his first Olympics and the importance and personal impact of remaining distinct, detached, and not clearly affiliated with any one specific group:

*It was awful. Basically, I was very isolated. Having said that, I do think it's important for the sport psychologist to be isolated, because you can't be seen to be one of the support team, or get too close to let's say the NGB (National Governing Body) or*

*the coach, because then the athletes will actually label you as one of them. Likewise, you can't get too close to the athletes or else the coaches and the governing body label you as one of them... in order to get that rapport, that relationship where people feel that they can trust you and give you all the details then they can't see you as one of the opposition. . . . And it can be very isolating and very lonely to tell you the truth. (Will)*

In discussing her work with an elite European football team, Rebecca reiterated Will's sentiments: "*I know I could have got closer with the athletes if I had wanted but I think it's also important to keep some distance.*" Rebecca's follow up comment that "*being alone in that environment (European football) can be draining*" reinforces the sense of isolation expressed in Will's quote and suggests that although sport psychologists in elite sport work across the organization and with a wide variety of people, they at times feel lonely and yearn for more intimate connections that their broader role does not permit them to make.

## The Influence of Elite Sport Cultures

Culture, defined in sport psychology as "a dynamic process characterized by the shared values, beliefs, expectations, and practices across the members and generations of a defined group" (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012, p. 340), is acknowledged as having a significant impact on the thoughts and actions of group members (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012; 2013; Nesti, 2010). Those interviewed reiterated that the influence of culture was powerful, and that culture, as one participant pointed out "binds and ties everything together." Though the cultures were identified as individually unique, there were certain core aspects that appeared to characterize all of the cultures that were described and therefore transcended intersport and intrasport differences; such as being intense, highly demanding, largely autocratic, entirely performance orientated, and often ruthless, to a degree that the sport psychologists had not typically observed while working in other sport settings e.g., youth sport. The influence of elite sport cultures contained three subthemes: a ruthless pursuit of performance, major tournaments and big games, and disruptive subcultures.

**Ruthless Pursuit of Performance.** A salient feature of elite sport culture, and one confirmed by all participants, is that the elite environment is driven almost exclusively by performance. John captured this facet of elite culture in recounting a story whereby a young sport psychologist mentioned that athlete well-being took precedence over performance and John replied, "*you better not let the performance director catch you saying that – he'll go spare!*" Participants explained how athletic success was inextricably linked with financial gain and organization wide accountability, and how consequently performance was pursued fanatically by all in the environment. Though practitioners recognized and embraced the explicit

performance agendas that almost always accompany employment contracts with elite teams and organizations “it’s performance focused, that’s the predominant theme that drives what I do” (Ashley), an exclusive focus on performance at the expense of everything else did not rest easy with all practitioners:

*Sport is a pathogenic environment. It’s not a healthy place to be elite sport; for all the images, it’s not... The message that gets perpetuated; if they’ve won everything is good, and if they’ve lost it doesn’t matter how morally they’ve acted; it was wrong. That’s not what I believe to be true. You have to resist getting sucked in to that. (Ben).*

Ben’s need to protect those within the elite sport environment seems to reflect his acknowledgment that in success obsessed environments it is his own values that are in question, as much as those of the culture. Chris similarly reflected on the critical issue of examining personal values, and the difficulty of working within an elite sport environment where his own values was at odds with the aggressive, bullying tactics displayed by key members of staff: “they just shouted at and abused everyone” to elicit athletic performance: “There was a helluva lot that I disrespected about the environment. It just didn’t match my values at all. . . . I found that very difficult as it meant that a lot of the time I wasn’t particularly comfortable.” Chris emphatically stressed that he had consciously resisted the prevailing culture in even when there was strong, open, and deliberate pressure on him to conform: “Imagine it as a bit of a playground gang. You’re going to be one of us. You’re going to do the things that we do, the things we think, or the things that we say or bugger off.” However, in disengaging from the culture, Chris conveyed not only a sense of his own rejection and alienation from those that fully embodied the culture, but also acknowledgment that his ability to contribute to performance may have been compromised: “Because everyone else in the environment is subscribing to being football people and doing what football people do, there’s a part of you that almost thinks that you’re failing if you’re not doing those things.”

**Major Tournaments and Big Games.** Culture is argued to reveal itself most clearly when it is under duress, when presented with challenges or problems outwith everyday routine. (Schein, 1985). In elite sport, these times of *cultural stress* were thought to occur most frequently during major competition (e.g., Olympics, World Championships, World Cups), in the build up to the big games or matches, (in sports with weekly performance demands), or at important times of the sporting season (e.g., chance to win a title or beat relegation). At such times, participants revealed that some of the more undesirable elite sport cultural traits (e.g., a disregard for welfare, aggressive behavior etc.) become more prominent (even accepted). Ben described the challenge of working during major tournaments and how heightened pressure and performance expectations affected people:

*The Olympics and the big tournaments have a tendency to escalate, complicate and completely catastrophize everything. . . . You’ve got more people, there’s more exposure, there’s more riding on it financially for the sport, for the future of the sports, for the individuals in the sport. . . . So it’s just the perceived importance and the scale of the whole thing and so on. It changes things. . . . You feel like you’re under siege sometimes and you’re trying to get the team through in one piece. And you come out the other side and it’s like you’ve been through a warzone, because it’s testing and it’s always pushed:*

Ashley similarly described the elite environment during major competition as “intense” and “claustrophobic” where people are “working long hours” and “under immense pressure.” In such conditions, Ashley asserted that the sport “must also personally manage” these pressures and demands because they are not immune to the behavior changing effects of major tournaments. In elaborating, Ashley recounted witnessing sport psychologists whose behavior changed because they had “ego needs to be fulfilled” or because they were seduced by “glory through association.” Ben also commented:

*Practitioners that you’ve known all your life - people just go weird. They think it’s so important for them and it is important. It looks good on a C.V. and it has an impact but if you need to sacrifice everything for a goal then it’s very difficult to stay congruent. (Ben)*

**Disruptive Subcultures.** Within the narratives, a seemingly paradoxical feature of elite sport emerged: performance oriented cultures often displayed behaviors and attitudes that were detrimental to producing winning performances. Here, Andy discussed a popular and powerful clique of footballers at a Premier League club that undermined stated performance goals: “They (players) would rather just mess about and have a laugh. . . .and then make some excuses rather than apply themselves. . . . more commonly the foreign players were pretty dedicated.” Negative subcultures were also observed among coaching staff “they (the manager and head coach) are blaming everyone and failing to take any responsibility”, while Rebecca commented on a subculture consisting of influential organizational personnel that seemingly acted in opposition to the rest of the environment:

*So I know I have a good grip on the team, the supporting staff, and the coaches. But you also have a large administration and other people in and around the club who are not of the same mindset. . . .But in a way, you can’t change people that you’re working with. They have their own mindset and group dynamics and culture. . . . Now it’s kind of like working for two teams here; they’re really against each other and that makes my job almost impossible. (Rebecca).*

John reiterated Rebecca’s sentiments that working with a culture or subculture that does not support the

stated goals of the environment or the sport psychologists' performance agenda was professionally demanding: *"I worked for this international team for two years and I said, 'There's no point to me being here. It's a professional standard. . . . I can't be effective here. That's fine. . . . I'm off.'"* While Rebecca and John relayed how these cultures undermined their role in a professional sense, their quotes also illuminate a recurring feeling within the narratives that providing a sport psychology service within negative and divided cultures (that were often resistant to the work of the sport psychologist) was a personally demanding task. Rebecca's quote illustrates such frustrations:

*I've written to the board saying I won't associate with that kind of culture. . . . They will actually have to try and change and do something about their own culture because at this time they're destroying the manager and the club by their behaviour. . . . I've never been so angry and frustrated, and up and down before this role. (Rebecca).*

Such emotional turmoil was emphasized by a number of practitioners to be considerably greater when working in a full-time capacity with one specific club or team. Andy gave an account of the personal demands of being a full-time sport psychologist for an English Premier League club:

*You are utterly immersed in it. We went around Christmas time, around three months without a day off. . . . And there is an enormous stress on the person throughout all of that. Especially if the environment is not great, especially if you're not winning, especially if you've got people around you that you don't really get on with. You know, if you're not in the trenches fighting for the same cause, there's a bit of bitching and backbiting and this, that, and the other. It's like being underwater and there's no way just to come up for breath sometimes. Then you're seeing the bloody team coach again. Then you're back in a training session again. Then you're back in the training ground. Then you're back in the hotel and you're with these people all the time. (Andy)*

## Surviving and Thriving

In the explicitly performance focused cultures described, participants asserted that the sacking pandemic witnessed in elite sport (Cruickshank and Collins, 2012, 2013; Cruickshank, Collins, & Minten, 2013; Nesti, 2010) inevitably affects the security of the sport psychologist. The group relayed how in elite sport a termination of contract could occur for many reasons, including: a failure to sustain relationships *"If you lose the athletes, they'll have you out!"*; financial status *"if they lose money they won't pay for you"*; the team not achieving rigid performance targets *"a sport that wants to win a certain number of medals otherwise everyone loses their job"*; or simply because there has been a change in leadership *"most of the*

*time when a new manager comes in, you're gone anyway."* Though this feature of elite sport was an accepted facet of choosing to work in an elite sport environment, many of the sport psychologists acknowledged that it impacted, influenced, and at times undermined the work that they attempted to undertake. Surviving and thriving included three subthemes: knowing when to challenge, how flexible do you get?, and developing self-awareness.

**Knowing When to Challenge.** Provision of a dissenting voice, or alternative opinion, was reported to be of genuine value in elite sport environments, but actually offering an alternative or challenging opinion was considered to be a demanding task, often associated with high-risk, and one that can test the relationships that practitioners have worked hard to cultivate. John commented:

*I can remember working with an athlete, and he had failed to get in a final at a World Championships. . . . I said 'I'm really sorry but I'm paid to do this. I'm looking you in the eye and I'm saying are you sure you still want to do this? Because you haven't acted this week like you've wanted to do it.' He went away, came back, three years later won an Olympic medal. . . . And that's difficult. It's difficult when you're in your fifties and it's even more difficult when you're in your twenties. . . . Now the way in which they [sport psychologists] say it, that's for them, but they need to address it. I can't leave it, can you? . . . For me, I'm professionally passionate about this. (John)*

It is important to stress that John was not attempting to claim his part in the athletes' later medal success. Rather he sought to emphasize the sport psychologists' performance agenda *"I'm paid to do this"* and the necessity of being able to challenge those in the environment when existing behavior and actions may be counter-productive to athlete or team performance. Though confrontation is a critical element of any therapeutic line and is not confined to the work of sport psychologists who practice in elite sport, the provision of a challenging or counter-cultural service can have severe personal consequences in elite sport environments that were asserted as often ruthless, totalitarian, and where there are unique distributions of power (such as the influence held by star athletes, Cruickshank, et al., 2013a). As such, it was widely acknowledged that the practitioner must carefully consider when to challenge, and when to refrain. Tom commented on his work within Olympic sport environments:

*With more maturity you pick the battles or pick the disagreements. At the same time you can't be completely beholden to that because you might have to challenge the decision maker. . . . You can lose yourself in it very quickly if you're not careful and also a big part of it is risk. If you're going to say something unpopular then you're risking everything potentially because some of these sports don't follow any EU*

*employment law, you'll just be gone. They don't need a reason. You'll just be gone! (Tom)*

**How Flexible Do you get?** Though the experienced practitioners interviewed were adamant that operating in a congruent manner underpinned their best work, they also discussed how remaining congruent or authentic was difficult and influenced by practical considerations:

*I'll try and act in a way that I do want to be able to sleep at night, but I also want to influence this over a longer term because there's work that needs doing. So sometimes I'll have to take a hit on the congruence in order to keep a relationship but always in the back of my mind I'm thinking I've taken that so I that I can get this. . . . Also, it sounds silly, but if you're financially secure it's a lot easier to act morally. Now personally, I can't just give up my job or lose my job. But at the same time I need to be able to sleep. (Tom)*

Tom readily acknowledged that he felt that it was a responsibility of the sport psychologist to be pragmatic at times, but he explained that pragmatism, flexibility, and a commitment to long-term positive change were valued components of his philosophy of practice. Thus, when these were incorporated into his applied practice Tom was acting congruently. Another interesting feature of Tom's quote is his recognition that his moral duty as a sport psychologist is affected by practical concerns such as a financial status. Other participants reinforced this reality and spoke about the financial implications of job loss, particularly in relation to the full-time contracts that are often found in elite sport: "I've noticed as a consultant I can be far more honest because if they decide to cut my contract that's fine. But full-time and they sack me - that's going to have a much more significant impact on lifestyle." (Chris)

Andy however, offered cautionary advice regarding the dangers of being overly flexible in terms of what can be compromised and outlined his own authentic position through which he is able to resist threats to his ability to work congruently:

*I think there's a difference to adapting to a circumstance and adapting to a situation and compromising something that's absolutely integral to you... Which is worth more - the fitting in or the value? If this is my true authentic response and I compromise it by that (small gesture) next time that might be my baseline and if I compromise it again then all of a sudden I've drifted away from this point here. So we end up in a position as humans where we say 'who the hell am I then?' (Andy)*

**Developing Self-Awareness.** In addressing critical questions of how to work pragmatically and effectively, yet still congruently, the group advocated for the development of self-awareness through reflective practice. Aligning with the proposals of Williams and

Andersen (2012), understanding "who you are", was repeatedly conveyed as a significant challenge, but one that is essential to undertake. Many of the group reiterated Williams and Andersen suggestions (and Andy's earlier assertion) that asking self-directed questions (e.g., what are my core values? Can I compromise? If so, how much and for what end? Who am I? What am I doing?) were critical in developing the essential reflective qualities and practitioner self-awareness that helps protect the individuals' ability to work in a congruent and/or authentic way. Being exposed to different elite sport environments was also emphasized as playing a significant role in becoming more self-aware, as Chris underlined: "I've probably started to discover much more of who I am as I've immersed myself in different environments. . . .you understand what resonates with you and what doesn't." In elaborating on his personal experience of reflection, Chris articulated how he had stepped out of the EPL environment for a period of time and had considered the things he had to do differently to be more successful in that kind of environment in the future:

*One of the things I did for a long time was judge that football environment as being wrong because it didn't conform to all the things that I valued. That kicks against a lot of the things I believed in - the fact that I judged it. I don't judge it as much now, but I recognize it for what it is. . . .I'm more able to be in that environment now without resisting. . . .just being me and letting the environment be around you. . . . from my point of view one of the things that worked is to work as a consultant and not as a full-time member of staff. I could step in and step out, I could take a breath and have a much more philosophical view on the whole thing. (Chris)*

Will suggested that ultimately it was perhaps this process of developing self-awareness in relation to one's own experiential journey that shaped not only the practitioners' experience of challenges, but also how these challenges were met:

*I suspect for every sport psychologist there will be a different solution for that particular issue and that to some extent is what experience is; finding out what your solution is... that's where your philosophy comes in and your values come in, and how you want to do things and you know where you feel comfortable because I think that's important. You've got to feel comfortable where you are and how you do things, and then you mould that to find your own idiosyncratic pathway. (Will)*

## Discussion

The present study examined and extended current knowledge of the challenges encountered by experienced sport psychologists when working in elite settings. Perhaps as a result of the studies focus on the personal meaning

of experiences, the challenges reported as most difficult to deal with were not solely technical in nature. Rather they also tested the practitioners on an emotional level, challenging the tightly held values and beliefs that underpinned their philosophies of practice. It was our view that challenges to congruence was therefore not only a major theme, but also one that provided the context against which other major challenges were often framed.

Lindsay et al. (2007), and Tod and Bond (2010) refer to the practitioners' journey toward congruence. The early career, less experienced and less secure (i.e., both personally and vocationally) practitioners who are typically seeking acceptance (to furnish their curriculum vitae) tend to 'grow' or progress toward a more congruent approach from their initial years following their education. An emerging message from this study however, is that more experienced practitioners are also perpetually striving for congruence. This is partly because they too are constantly developing in terms of their own awareness and personal growth, and also because the elite environments in which they work also evolve and exert considerable influence on their ability to practice in a congruent manner. That congruence featured prominently within practitioner accounts of other major challenges suggests that congruence is an inherently complex, unstable, and dynamic construct, as opposed to something that is simply arrived at after a period of time or after a number of experiences.

The major theme of working in a broader role: managing multiple relationships is aligned with the emerging literature suggesting that sport psychology intervention primarily focusing on one-to-one mental skills work with athletes is not sufficiently impactful at the elite level (Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Nesti, 2010), and is becoming increasingly obsolete at this level of sport (Nesti, 2010). Rather, being able to work across the elite environment (i.e., not just with athletes) in an organizational and cultural capacity was proposed as imperative to do work that has impact and that is well received. Participants asserted that the ability to build and maintain a large number of diverse relationships underpins this broader functioning, as does demonstrating value to different groups within the environment (e.g., athletes, coaches, management). Complicatedly, it was asserted that practitioners must consciously strive to remain unaffiliated with any one group, so that they are more able to adhere to the fundamental professional and ethical considerations that naturally occur through managing multiple relationships with different key stakeholders. The findings presented here indicate that being able to successfully meet this challenge requires a knowledge and application of ethical awareness and professional codes of conduct (Moore, 2003) alongside a tacit awareness of the status of the many relationships that are being maintained. Accordingly, the training and education of students (future and existing) and less experienced sport psychologists in this area is proposed as crucial. Specifically, it suggests the value of an increased focus on counseling and counseling skills (Eubank et al., 2014; Katz & Hemmings, 2009),

so that early career practitioners are equipped with the skills necessary to maximize their relationship building and management capabilities, as well as an awareness of ethical issues that are likely to arise.

Regarding the influence of elite sport cultures, the sport psychologists reported encountering many aspects of elite environments that did not match their own values and beliefs. As a result, practitioners often felt misaligned with the prevailing culture that they worked within. It has been pointed out here and by Nesti (2004) that such situations are inevitably interwoven with the ethical positioning of the sport psychologist. Nesti (2004) presented the case study of a sport psychologist, who was operating inside an EPL club and discovered that considering and reflecting on issues in relation to his own values and ethics was the most important aspect of his work. This was principally due to the cynical and ethically challenging environment that the sport psychologist found himself in. It is pertinent to highlight this work as important because it (a) hails from an existential sport psychology perspective that is vastly different from the more familiar cognitive approach, and (b) considers the operationalizing of a sport psychologist in a setting and level of sport which is unfortunately rarely encountered in the sport psychology literature.

Participants highlighted how strong conformity or *socialization* demands were commonly experienced. Socialization is considered a pervasive feature of group membership (Wilson, 2001) and occurs when individuals' behavior and attitudes are shaped and affected by the attitudes, practices, and ideologies that are commonly held and displayed by members of the larger group (Potrac, Jones, & Armour 2002; Wilson, 2001). The sport psychologists recounted how this process of socialization threatened practitioner values, identity, and ultimately congruent practice; particularly during major tournaments and big games where it was proposed that pressure increased and winning mattered most. Though participants accepted certain attitudes and values of the wider group (e.g., performance focused), the need to resist *perceived* negative aspects of elite sport culture is supported by Nesti (2010) and Relvas, Littlewood, Nesti, Gilbourne, and Richardson (2010). They asserted that though sport psychologists should aim to work within the nuances of a particular culture, they must also resist inevitable pressures to become assimilated. It is argued that the sport psychologist will be most effective when they appreciate the demands of the culture without permitting their practice to be compromised by these same demands; ultimately this will test their values, resilience, motivation and courage (Nesti, 2010).

Many of the participants seemed to find working alongside behaviors, groups, or subcultures that were perceived as destructive, counter-intuitive to performance goals, or resistant to sport psychology work, a particularly challenging aspect of working within elite sport. Faced with such scenarios, many of the practitioners described how "*they left*" or "*wrote to the board*" or even just "*drifted away from the culture*." However, the

difficulties that prompted such actions are consistent with assertions that group-group conflict can rapidly escalate in elite sport leading to a disintegration of cooperation and collaboration (Reid et al., 2004), that not all high performance environments are actually high performing (Cruickshank & Collins, 2012), and that cultures (particularly entrenched cultures) change slowly over time and are resistant to attempts to change it (Schein, 1985; Wilson, 2001). This body of literature suggests that if elite sport psychology delivery is to increasingly include organizational work and culture shaping practices, then sport psychologists will continue to be exposed to and asked to work with elements of the culture that may not sit well with their values or expectancies of what an elite team culture should ideally look and feel like. Consequently, recommendations that sport psychologists with ambitions of elite team consultancy should develop their organizational and culture shaping knowledge and capabilities (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Eubank et al., 2014) seem wise, as do contentions within organizational literature (e.g., Schein, 1985; Wilson, 2001) that suggest those working with culture at times have to adopt reasonable expectations about the nature of such work and what can realistically be achieved.

In the major theme of surviving and thriving, the ever-present threat of termination of contract meant that the sport psychologists interviewed were often operating from insecure, and tenuous positions, where there was no guarantee of remaining in the environment long-term.

This reality of elite team consultancy was revealed to have a profound impact on practitioner decision making and actions taken. For example, challenging people or prevailing beliefs within the environment was considered intricate and high-risk, primarily because of the ever-present threat of contract termination. Consequently, even if challenging others was motivated by something integral to the practitioners' philosophy of practice (e.g.,

an ethical stance or a desire to improve performance) the importance of selecting the moments to successfully influence others was emphasized. In carefully choosing when and how to challenge, it was asserted that practitioners could provide a *valuable* and *valued* counter-cultural service whereby they could survive, secure support for their work, and promote change where necessary. This outlook is consistent with literature that suggests that sport psychologists in elite sport must always be aware of the political landscape (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2012). For some, this commitment to remaining in the environment to have a positive impact over the long-term meant an acceptance that a flexible, pragmatic approach would at times compromise practitioner congruence. Conversely, other practitioners urged caution regarding the adoption of an overly flexible approach, particularly if it meant fitting in at the expense of a core value or principle.

An important point for all sport psychologists seeking employment in elite sport to consider before entering elite environments was the admission of some participants that their ethical position and moral duty as a sport psychologist was affected by financial and vocational

security; at times these practitioners could not, or indeed would not take certain actions if their own personal situation dictated that they could not afford to lose their job. This is an important point to for neophyte practitioners to consider in particular, because: (a) as suggested by this study, elite environments place considerable demands on practitioner congruence, (b) because full-time sport psychology contracts are rare and tend to be offered at the elite level, and (c) typically neophytes tend to be less secure, both personally and vocationally.

In response to the variety of challenges that were conveyed, participants were supportive of calls for sport psychologists to be educated and trained to develop their self-awareness and to *know thyself* (Corlett, 1996; Lindsay et al., 2007). Actively engaging with reflective practice literature and processes (e.g., Anderson, Knowles, & Gilbourne, 2004; Cropley, Miles, Hanton, & Niven, 2007) is therefore proposed as crucial to the construction of an approach to practice that assists practitioners to make sense of their experiences in elite sport, while being able to manage themselves and maintain personal and professional effectiveness in the face of adversity.

While the study presents a number of implications for sport psychology delivery at the elite level, several limitations warrant discussion. Despite a diverse sample (e.g., gender, age, recruited from a range of elite environments), the themes that emerged only reflect the experience of current participants, and it cannot be assumed that these replicate the experiences of all sport psychologists who work at the elite level. Correspondingly, all but one of the sport psychologists worked primarily in British elite sport environments, which again may limit the generalizability of the findings to other nations. Further, accepting that that an individuals' ability to cope with challenges is influenced by the resources of the individual, which changes over time and in response to different circumstances (Cooper, 1998), it is recognized that the most challenging aspects of the sport psychologist role may not have been the most pressing for a particular individual at the time of research.

There are also many intriguing possibilities for future research. Differences between elite sport environments that were explicitly or implicitly conveyed within the narratives could potentially provide alternative contexts for the study of challenges and/or practitioner experience of working in elite environments. Examples included, but are not limited to: intrasport (e.g., between clubs) and intersport differences (e.g., football and rugby), the challenges experienced in environments that move in cycles (e.g., Olympics, World Championships) as compared with those that operate in response to weekly performance demands (e.g., EPL), and also the differences in experiences of full-time, part-time, or consultancy work. In addition, given the findings and implications of this study, research into the neophyte experience of elite sport would provide a useful perspective on the challenges that are encountered in elite environments.

Despite these limitations, the results of the current study provide additional insights into practitioners'

experiences of challenge within elite sport. The findings suggest that the challenges of elite sport psychology delivery are numerate, professionally taxing, and deeply personalized and meaningful affairs; created not only by the demands of the elite environment but also in conjunction with the sport psychologists own deeply held values and sense of congruence, which necessarily complicate practitioner perceptions of challenge and informs their subsequent responses to them. The need to constantly search for and develop congruence is therefore proposed to be a never-ending process, and one that is vital to ethical and effective practice. Valuable perspectives on the nature and characteristics of elite sport environments and the evolving role of sport psychology delivery within these environments have also been gleaned. Adopting a wider perspective, we hope that these insights will stimulate interest and discussion among academics, applied practitioners, and training bodies responsible for the education and training of future sport psychologists. Specifically, and echoing previous literature (e.g., Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Eubank et al., 2014), serious consideration must be given to whether current accreditation programs adequately reflect the needs of those who operate within elite team environments, or those who have ambitions of such work.

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