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Working as a Sport Psychology Practitioner in Professional Cricket: Challenges,

Experiences and Opportunities

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1   **Abstract**

2   While there have been increasing opportunities for sport psychology practitioners in cricket

3   there are concerns regarding employment practices within the field, and the knock-on impact

4   upon the practitioner. The aim of this research was to explore the experiences, reflections,

5   challenges and opportunities perceived by practitioners regarding their own roles delivering

6   sport psychology in elite cricket. Participants were 12 sport psychology practitioners (8 male

7   and 4 female) purposively selected based on their experience working within cricket.

8   Participants were interviewed to gain an understanding of their experiences working as a sport

9   psychology practitioner. The data were thematically analyzed resulting in seven higher order

10   themes emerging: *the role; perceptions of the psychologist; consultation approach; limiting*

11   *factors; first team environment; challenges faced; and proposed changes*. Results suggest that

12   there are similarities in the challenges experienced across professional clubs and at different

13   levels in cricket. Broader challenges for the clubs, National Governing Body, and the sport

14   psychology profession also emerged.

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16   *Keywords:*

17   Cricket, applied practice, practitioner, role clarity

Working as a Sport Psychology Practitioner in Professional Cricket: Challenges, Experiences and Opportunities

1   Cricket, as a sport, presents significant psychological challenges to players, coaches

2   and support staff. In particular, the long duration of games, and variability in the overall

3   duration of games can make psychological strategies difficult to apply (Cotterill & Barker,

4   2013). The psychological nature of these challenges in the sport lend themselves to

5   engagement with sport psychology, and sport psychology practitioners. While this is the case

6   sport psychology provision within cricket has lagged behind many other sports and domains,

7   particularly in comparison to Olympic sports in the UK (Cotterill, 2017).

8   The sport is relatively unique in that performance is simultaneously individual- and

9   team-focused. Although a team sport, cricket comprises discrete passages of play, that involve

10   a player (the bowler) bowling the ball at another player (the batsman – cf. Smith, Young,

11   Figgins, & Arthur, 2016). At the same time the batsman is also taking on the rest of the

12   opposition team in the field (Thelwell, Weston, & Greenlees, 2007). These batting and

13   bowling skills can be described as "closed skills" requiring the execution of a complex

14   sequence of actions with minimum error tolerance and specific time constraints (Müller,

15   Abernethy, & Farrow, 2006; Renshaw & Fairweather, 2000). The format of the game itself

16   also varies significantly. There are currently 20-overs per team (three-four hours), 50-overs

17   per team (seven-eight hours), and four or five day formats of the game (where both teams bat

18   and bowl twice each - Cotterill, 2017). In the context of cricket an 'over' represents a series of

19   six balls 'bowled' at the batsmen by one specific 'bowler'. At the end of this series of balls

20   there is a slight delay in play then another player begins another series of six balls. These

21   different formats of the game, in turn, can present varied psychological challenges. In

22   particular, challenges relating: to fatigue; rest and recovery (particularly for four and five-day

23   games); concentration; emotional control; and audience effects (crowds can range from a few

1   hundred for four-day games up to tens of thousands for one-day and 20-over games – Cotterill

2   & Barker, 2013). At the International level, the sport is characterized by nations 'touring'

3   other countries in a reciprocal relationship of competition. These tours can lead to players,

4   coaches and support staff being away from home for anything from a few weeks to many

5   months.

6   Sport psychology, as a profession, continues to face challenges in gaining acceptance in

7   the sport and exercise sector in the UK (Cotterill & Barker, 2013). While there has been a

8   significant increase in the number of full-time positions available over the last 20 years, it is also

9   true that these still form the minority of opportunities (Barker, & Winter, 2014). The norm still

10   appears to be hour-by-hour, or day-by day contracts, and short-term consultancy agreements

11   (Cotterill, 2017). This status quo presents some challenges both to the practitioner and the client.

12   First, these agreements often offer little job security to the practitioner with payment often made

13   in arrears via invoices based on at best flexible employment contracts (Guest, 2004). Second, the

14   employment of external practitioners by the client often bypasses normal Human Resources (HR)

15   processes, meaning there may be no clear job description or agreed terms-of-employment. These

16   opaque arrangements can prevent the establishment of clear expectations between practitioner

17   and each respective client (Cotterill, 2017). There is also an increased pressure on sport

18   psychology practitioners to demonstrate 'impact' early and continuously (Hackfort & Schinke,

19   2017). The ability to demonstrate immediate 'impact' or effectiveness, in turn, is hindered by the

20   lack of clarity regarding the job the practitioner is being engaged to do.

21   There is also the issue of who is qualified to practice as a sport psychology practitioner. In

22   the UK the title of 'Sport and Exercise Psychologist' is a UK Government regulated title. In order

23   to use the title you need to be on the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) register of

24   qualified practitioner psychologists. To be a recognized psychologist you need to be a Chartered

25   Psychologist by the British Psychological Society; to be an Accredited Sport and Exercise

1 Scientist you need to be accredited by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Science

2 (BASES - Cotterill, 2011). Discussions regarding what constitutes being appropriately qualified

3 are beyond the scope of this paper (see Woolway & Harwood, 2015 for a review), but current

4 practice in the UK expects sport psychology practitioners to hold at least one of these levels of

5 recognition. This being the case, at least one of these qualifications should be specified as a

6 requirement to be engaged as a sport psychology practitioner. Anecdotal evidence suggests that

7 many non-Olympic sports receive psychological support from practitioners who are neither

8 registered nor accredited. There is also evidence that this is a challenge facings the profession

9 more broadly (Hackford & Schinke, 2017).

10 The categorization of sport psychology practitioners as 'consultants' rather than

11 'employed' staff can in itself be problematic. For instance, in the business world, management

12 consultants have been viewed in a particularly negative light (Kitay & Wright, 2004). Often

13 consultants are conceptualized as confident practitioners taking advantage of uncertain

14 managers selling the latest fad or fashion; or individuals who are highly skilled in

15 manipulating the impressions of the clients, and are able to command exorbitant fees (Pinault,

16 2000). It has been suggested that the life of the external consultant in a business context can

17 be challenging as it is "an on-going effort of convincing the client of one's usefulness and

18 contribution" (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, & Davies, 2004: p.543). Though while the

19 experiences of external consultants have been explored in broader business contexts there is a

20 lack of understanding of those experiences within sport psychology.

21 It has also been suggested that the nature of the challenges encountered by sport

22 psychology practitioners operating within elite and professional sports teams have arguably

23 been inadequately considered to date (McDougall, Nesti, & Richardson, 2015; Nesti, 2010).

24 In part this may be due to the inaccessibility of elite team environments (Eubank, Nesti, &

1   Cruickshank, 2014; Nesti, 2010). As a result, a greater focus of the experiences of sport

2   psychology practitioners at these levels is required.

3   From an outsider perspective it would appear that cricket is a sport that should be well-

4   disposed to embracing sport psychology. In part this is due to the key concentration challenges

5   the sport presents and the significant amount of time available for cognition, reflection and

6   evaluation during performance. Nevertheless, at some levels this acceptance is not the case. As a

7   result, there are few studies considering the sport psychology landscape within the sport. This is

8   problematic as there has been an increased focus in the associated literature recently on

9   understanding sport psychology practice within specific sports (e.g., Hackfort & Schinke, 2017).

10   Bull (1995) reflected on his experience working in cricket with the England women's team,

11   highlighting the importance of "the immersion approach" (p.159), and building strong

12   relationships with coaches, players, and managers. The importance of immersion and

13   interpersonal relationships was also reported by Barker, McCarthy, and Harwood (2011) in their

14   reflecting on working in developmental academies in cricket and soccer. Cotterill (2012; 2017)

15   further highlighted a lack of understanding by client groups in professional regarding what sport

16   psychology practitioners can do, and as a result how best to maximize the effectiveness of the

17   sport psychology practitioner. The small number of studies in cricket represent a limited

18   understanding of the sport and the associated challenges for sport psychology practitioners.

19   From a broader perspective, while understanding the experiences of practitioners is

20   important to the future development of the profession there is little research that has explored

21   the experiences of those practitioners at different levels within the same sport and specifically

22   not in cricket. Also, unlike some other sports there is limited research exploring the

23   experiences of sport psychology practitioners at any level within the sport of cricket.

24   Developing this understanding is important as the unique nature of cricket and its associated

25   challenges means practitioners cannot simply apply the lessons learnt from other sports. As a

1   result, there were two specific research question for this study. First, What are the

2   experiences, reflections, challenges and opportunities perceived by practitioners regarding

3   their own roles delivering sport psychology in elite cricket, in the UK? Second, How do these

4   concepts and themes form interrelationships and co-dependences that may inform changes to

5   future practice?

Method

6   **Participants**

7   A criterion-based approach to sampling was adopted for the current study (Patton, 2015).

8   Specifically, participants were recruited who had a formal role working with UK-based

9   professional cricket clubs, and had more than 12 months experience. These criteria were

10   designed to ensure that participants were recruited who could co-construct knowledge that

11   was relevant to the aim of this project (Rhind et al., 2013). There were 12 (8 male and 4

12   female) volunteering participants (M_{age} = 36.4 years, age range: 25 to 54 years; $M_{experience}$ =

13   8.67 years $M_{experience\ cricket}$ = 5.75 years range: 1 to 13 years) out of a total of 15 who were

14   approaches to participate. Further descriptive detail for each participant is provided in Table

15   1. The level at which these participants were working was classified as either 'semi-elite' or

16   'competitive elite' according to Swann, Moran, and Piggott's (2015) four-point classification

17   system for elite level performers (semi-elite, competitive elite, successful elite, and world-

18   class elite). Swann and colleagues described *semi-elite* to be athletes whose highest level of

19   participation is below the top standard possible (such as talent development programs);

20   *Competitive elite* was described as athletes regularly competing at the top level for their sport

21   (such as top divisions or leagues).

22   **Procedure**

23   Participants were interviewed to gain an insight into their experiences of working as a

24   sport psychology practitioner in professional cricket. Initial contact with the participants was

1   made via an e-mail where the main focus of the project was explained in broad terms. The

2   participants were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting between 45-90

3   minutes and afterward to review a verbatim transcription of the interview. The respondents

4   were all interviewed via the software program Skype, on a video call (Hanna, 2012). All of

5   the participants were informed orally of the aim of the research project, that data would be

6   treated confidentially, that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the

7   study at any time without consequences. The interviews were recorded via the 'call recorder'

8   software program (Skype, 2014), which is used for capturing Skype video calls, and also with

9   a regular digital voice recorder (i.e. back-up recorder) to ensure that no data were lost on the

10   audio track. This Skype-based approach is similar to that adopted by Elsborg, Diment, and

11   Elbe (2015) in interviewing sport psychology practitioners who worked at the 2012 Olympic

12   games. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. To strengthen the inter-reader

13   reliability, a second party read through each transcription while listening to the interview

14   (Patton, 2002). The transcription was sent to the interviewees via e-mail and they emailed

15   back with their corrections and comments to avoid misunderstandings in the transcription

16   process. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Winchester ethics

17   committee.

18   A non-foundational approach to judging the quality of qualitative enquiry was adopted

19   in the current study (Smith & Caddick, 2012). The specific criteria for judging the quality of

20   this research included: the contribution it makes to the field, its coherence, sincerity,

21   resonance and credibility (Tracy, 2010). A key aim of this study was to co-construct

22   knowledge that contributes to the understanding of sport psychology practitioner experiences

23   and expectations working in the sport of cricket and to report substantive findings. This

24   substantive report of the findings was also achieved by using detailed quotes from a number

25   of specific participants when creating the results section of this manuscript. The coherence of

1   the findings in this study was achieved via discussions with a critical friend (Didymus, 2017).

2   In terms of sincerity and the truthfulness of the data, it appears that rapport was effectively

3   gained because participants spoke openly and fully about their experiences. Evidence of this

4   included the length of the interviews, and that participants mentioned players by name, thus

5   suggesting that they trusted the researcher not to disclose any such confidential information

6   about their role working an elite and public environment. Regarding resonance, the core aim

7   was to produce findings that are valuable in professional cricket contexts (Tracy 2010). The

8   credibility of the data was enhanced by spending further time with the participants 'virtually'

9   before commencing the interviews, by sharing each practitioner's interview transcription with

10   that individual to encourage reflection and dialogue about the data that had been deemed most

11   pertinent, through maintaining a reflexive journal and an audit trail of the research, and by

12   having a critical friend to scrutinize and discuss pertinent matters.

13   A descriptive phenomenological philosophy (Englander, 2012) underpinned the

14   current study. This standpoint underpinned the selection of participants, the number of

15   participants in the study, the questions asked, and the data collection procedure adopted. This

16   phenomenological philosophy also determined the structure of the manuscript, specifically

17   with the development of separate results (containing the emergent thematic analysis) and

18   discussion (exploring the implications of the themes in relation to existing literature) sections

19   (Smith & Osborne, 2015).

20   **Data analysis**

21   The interviews lasted an average of 93 minutes with a range of 75-150 minutes. Interviews

22   were terminated when saturation of information was achieved. This saturation was

23   represented in the current study by participant repetition, and when the interviewer felt no

24   new information was emerging (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Interviews were transcribed verbatim

25   and then read and re-read as the first author assumed the posture of indwelling (Maykut &

1 Morehouse, 1994). The data were analyzed using the NVivo software package. (QSR

2 International Pty Ltd. 2016). This process involves the researcher immersing themselves in

3 the data in an attempt to understand the participants from an empathetic, as opposed to a

4 sympathetic point of view. Given the flexible nature of the interview guide, as well as the

5 need to explore relationships between themes, an inductive approach to data analysis

6 incorporating the constant comparative method was used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton,

7 2002), similar to the approach adopted by Elsborg et al. (2015). Specifically, an initial

8 discovery sheet was used to identify any recurring words, concepts and/or ideas that emerged

9 from the raw data. This helped to create analytical memos and develop provisional coding

10 categories and higher order themes. The interview transcripts were then re-examined in order

11 to establish whether any other data should be considered under each of the higher order

12 themes (e.g., as sub-themes), or whether any new higher order themes needed to be created.

13 Once no new higher-order or sub-themes emerged from the data, it was assumed that the

14 analysis was complete. Explorations of similarities and differences about performance

15 preparation and warm-ups were also sought across interviews.

16 **Results**

17   The analysis of the data highlighted seven super-ordinate themes and 40 subordinate

18 themes. These super-ordinate themes and associated subordinate themes are presented in

19 Figure 1. and include: *the role (eight subordinate themes); perceptions of the psychologist*

20 *(four subordinate themes); consultation approach (three subordinate themes); limiting factors*

21 *(eight subordinate themes); first team environment (four subordinate themes); challenges*

22 *faced (seven subordinate themes); and proposed changes (six subordinate themes).*

23 **The role**

24   Participants highlighted that often the role of the practitioner was determined in a

25 transient fashion at the local level by the coach. With the younger age groups (academy level)

1   the role of 'relationship counselor' was consistently mentioned by participants. There was

2   also a perceived lack of clarity in terms of the role of the sport psychology practitioner and

3   the associated performance indicators. This lack of clarity was highlighted by participant four

4   who reflected that:

5   I always got the feeling that initially it was a case of 'right in order to get this funding

6   from the ECB [National governing body] we have to have certain pieces of the jigsaw

7   in place . . . as a result no-one really knew what a sport psychologist did, or what the

8   job should be . . . just that they should have one [sport psychologist].

9   There was also a strong feeling among participants that the sport psychology

10   practitioner role required much more of the practitioner's time than had originally been

11   agreed. One example of this view was presented by participant three:

12   I felt it was really important for them [players and coaches] to see me and for me to give

13   the impression I was passionate about learning about the sport by watching the players

14   perform and train. I was given the opportunity to give input after sessions, so if I didn't

15   have anything to say it was you know I've got nothing extra add, but often I would be

16   invited down from the balcony at the end of the training session, to give some context to

17   things that I'd observed or things that I might want to work with them on, and that was a

18   really good opportunity. I wasn't paid for the extra time, but I would not have been able

19   to do my job without it.

20   This perspective suggests that there is a lack of appreciation at general level in cricket of the

21   nature of the sport psychology practitioner role, and in particular the broader engagement that

22   is required to be effective as a practitioner. The nature of the specific environment itself also

23   impacted upon the role performance. For example, participant eleven suggested that:

24   It was quite restrictive initially in terms of being classroom-based, with a mental skills

25   focus. I suppose thinking back to when I first qualified, that would have been my

1   comfort zone, but it was restrictive. It would have been useful, certainly with the

2   emerging players, to have less educational workshops and more opportunity for small

3   group work, one-to-ones, and more involvement in the actual practical coaching, and

4   integrating psychology into that, rather than it being seen as something that's separate.

5   The participants also highlighted the significant anxiety and stress associated with the

6   short-term nature of the role, offering little job security. Verbal agreements were often at a

7   local level with the coach or academy director, and were often not formalized contracts, or

8   even short-term consultancy contracts. This perspective was highlighted by participant eight

9   who reflected that:

10   It is sometimes really difficult, not knowing if you are going to be retained or not, and

11   just when you think 'well that is it, I have not heard anything about this year' you get a

12   call from the coach saying 'we want you to come back again this winter'.

13   This lack of certainty can make it difficult to plan time and workload effectively. This

14   outcome also increases the likelihood of the sport psychology practitioner 'over working' to

15   make a good impression by investing the hours required to do a good job rather than the hours

16   they are paid for.

17   Trying to ensure continuity of the role was also a challenge, with the preferred

18   approach within the county system to employ sport psychology practitioners, particularly at

19   the academy level, during the winter months. This approach resulted in the sport psychology

20   practitioners often only seeing the players in the off-season making it difficult to accurately

21   identify performance-related issues, and to assess intervention effectiveness. This experience

22   was highlighted by participant nine who reflected:

23   You have got to really challenge, to stress the importance of you being there all year

24   round rather than just during winter training, otherwise the players see it as something

1   that they do in preparation and don't necessarily transfer over into the competitive

2   environment. They sometimes just see it as school-like education.

3 This lack of understanding regarding what a sport psychology practitioner does and how they

4 could be used was also highlighted by participant six:

5   I still think there's a little bit of a misconception that they perceive the role of the sport

6   psych to be very clinical, so it's still, certainly with some of the physios, that view. I

7   think they perceive the role to be quite sort of clinical based, so you know if

8   somebody's got depression or presenting signs of you know depression, I think they

9   would see me as the fix.

10 There was also a view among participants that the role of the sport psychology practitioner

11 differed significantly depending on whether you were working at an academy or professional

12 level. This view was highlighted by participant seven who stated that:

13   I think the academy is about education, it's about awareness. There is still some of

14   that with the first team, but primarily it's about education and awareness and skill.

15   Skill acquisition, skill development of some of the mental skills that we talk about. At

16   pro-level it's probably about re-enforcement, it's about reminding, and we certainly do

17   quite a lot of person-centered solution focused work with the pros, primarily due to a

18   lack of time really, on their part to engage in developmental work.

19 **Perceptions of the practitioner**

20   The way the sport psychology practitioner was perceived within the environment was

21 an important influencing factor in the role. A number of the participants highlighted the

22 importance of being perceived as being trustworthy. Also, that this perception differed in

23 different groups (players, coaches, and support staff). There was a distinct difference amongst

24 participants regarding whether they gravitated towards the coaching group within the club, or

25 towards the science and medicine team. In reflecting on how they were perceived by the team,

1   participant one stated "I know that I am viewed within the academy as someone who's

2   accessible, who's visible, who's supportive, and I've been keen to develop this concept of

3   sport psychology being all about performance enhancement". There was also a general view

4   among participants that the perceptions of the sport psychology practitioner were more

5   positive among the academy squad and younger professional squad players. For example,

6   participant one reflected that:

7   I think the perception within the young players, and the young professional players, is

8   one of 'this is somebody who I can turn to for support, advice, guidance and

9   feedback', but that's predominantly because, I have known them since they were

10   thirteen years of age and they've gone through the academy system.

11   This view regarding the different perceptions was also supported by participant four who

12   stated:

13   I've never had an instance where a player doesn't want to engage or has been forced to

14   engage, and I think part of that, at the younger age group is that it's part and parcel of

15   the program. So it's something that they have grown up with, you know we start

16   under-ten's with some basic psych workshops but then as they go through the system

17   they get more and more exposure, and so I think it's just an integrated part of their

18   training. We try to do a classroom session and then take the knowledge down into the

19   hall and build that into a practical session. Trying to make it just part of their training,

20   just like strength and conditioning.

21   There was also a lack of understanding highlighted throughout this study of who sport

22   psychology practitioners are, what qualifications they should have, and how to recruit them.

23   This point was illustrated by participant three who reflected:

1   I think it's just, certainly at our county, word of mouth. I know that there have been

2   some instances of the usual look at the local University, find somebody that's got the

3   name psychologist mentioned in their title and give them a ring; that's been common.

4   Another factor highlighted by participants in this study was the perceived lack of

5   understanding of what 'being qualified means' within sport psychology meant. Participant

6   seven shared that:

7   It's all via word of mouth and recommendation. The club do not have a clue about

8   BASES or the BPS, and don't really know what qualifications you should have. No-

9   one at the club ever asked me what my qualifications were, or whether I was HCPC

10 registered.

11 **Consultation approach**

12 A consistent theme that emerged through the interviews was the 'free reign'

13 practitioners had in terms of the approach they adopted, and more generally what they did.

14 Also, the importance of relationship building was highlighted throughout the study.

15 Particularly those participants who had been involved with a club for a number of years

16 highlighted how the fostering of positive relationships could facilitate input at more of an

17 environmental level. This perspective was encapsulated by participant four who stated:

18 I'm quite holistic in my approach, so I don't just purely look at performance. I do take

19 quite a broad view of things and look at player lives as a whole, developing them as

20 people, and certainly for the academy, I do get involved on a school front at well, and

21 to a little bit, in terms of what's happening there and managing that balance as well.

22 And I suppose I also see my role as helping coaches and the coaching team, well

23 certainly at academy level, to work together and to get the best out of players.

24 This view was also articulated by participant six who reflected:

25 When I attend the home games of the first team I would always make a point of

1   meeting up with the director of cricket, we would spend a good hour or so every day

2   just talking about what we see and what's going on and that type of thing, to support

3   him in his role as well.

4 **First team environment**

5   A number of challenges were specifically highlighted about working at the first-team

6 (professional) level. The most significant of which was the fact that there were few sport

7 psychology practitioners employed at this level. This point was highlighted by participant

8 four who reflected that:

9   I don't know what the stats are, but I don't know how many counties actually have a

10   psych; what I would call properly attached, not somebody who comes in ad hoc, on

11   the odd occasion, but who actually is attached to the club. I don't think there would be

12   many at first team level.

13 There was a view among participants that the sport psychology service at the first team level

14 was far more likely to be reactive rather than proactive. One of the reasons for the lack of

15 engagement often at the first team level was the fact that many of the players at this level had

16 not progressed through sport psychology educational programs. This point was highlighted by

17 participant one who reflected that:

18   I think the culture within cricket's changing, and if I walk into a first team dressing

19   room now, I probably get eye contact and handshakes from probably half the dressing

20   room and the rest would probably look away in terms of what the hell's he doing in

21   here? But the culture is definitely changing I think, as a consequence of, as I said,

22   visibility, accessibility of people like myself being in and around the club.

23 This view on the evolving first team environment was also supported by participant ten who

24 stated that:

1   At the first team level, I think over time they have learnt that it's an important area and

2   they need to start engaging with it. I just don't think at a management level they fully

3   understand the role or how you and I would perceive the role.

4   However, while recent advances are positive there was still a view that the provision of

5   support at the professional level still required further evolution. For example, participant

6   seven stated that:

7   We are getting some engagement with the pro's but it is still a pretty adhoc. The fact

8   kind of reflects the split views of the coaches regarding the usefulness of one-to-one

9   work with the sports psych.

10   There was also a further challenge highlighted when working at the professional level that

11   appeared to by quite unique to cricket as outlined by participant twelve "I think the difficulty

12   if you're talking about the pro-level is that so many players go away in the winter, you know

13   actually between November and February we'd probably have like six players around, with

14   many off playing overseas".

15   **Challenges faced**

16   A number of factors highlighted as 'challenges' consistently emerged through the

17   interviews. These included: the amount of time with the players (individually rather than as a

18   group); access to the players (speaking to them in the first place); a lack of awareness of the

19   sport psychology practitioner and their role at higher levels in the club (executive level);

20   space constraints (where they could work with the players); a lack of a job/role description

21   for the sport psychology practitioner; and limited Continued Professional Development

22   (CPD) opportunities (either at the club or more broadly in the sport).

23   For example, participant one in reflecting on specific challenges highlighted the issue of

24   acceptance with the more senior professionals within the club "I would argue that one of the

1   biggest challenges is credibility with the older players. I think the perception of the sport

2   psych being somebody who you only utilize or work with when you've got a problem".

3   Time with the players was consistently highlighted as a specific challenge by all of the

4   participants in this study, and particularly time accessing the players in the environment. This

5   point was highlighted by participant two who stated that:

6   Time and access, there's no question. If you're not there one or two days a week on a

7   regular basis I think it's difficult to actually exert a meaningful influence, and you're

8   constantly sort of chasing your tail kind of thing. So time and access, that's a major

9   challenge.

10   The amount of time available to work with the players is important as it can directly impact

11   upon the scale of intervention and change the practitioner is seeking to achieve. Also, reacting

12   to changes in the structure of sessions that impacted upon the time available was also

13   highlighted. Participant three articulated this succinctly in reflecting:

14   I remember doing sessions whereby you were told you had thirty-minute one-to-

15   one's, and then you'd turn up on the day and get told 'oh actually this has happened,

16   and you've now got fifteen minutes on a conveyor belt'; so that can be a challenge. I

17   think the other thing is about making sure that while the coaches are buying-in to the

18   program, that they make sure that their buy-in is really transparent to the players,

19   because I do remember a session whereby I was delivering a first workshop to a group

20   of academy players, and whilst I appreciate the coaching staff are extremely busy, I

21   was asked, is it okay if I go downstairs as I've got loads to do, and I think for that first

22   session it was particularly important for the coach to see what I was doing.

23   This issue of time working with the clients is a particular concern as this can impact upon the

24   quality of the relationship between the practitioner and the client.

1   Another specific challenge highlighted by the participants in this study related to the

2 advertisement of positions and the transparency of the appointment process. There was a

3 strong feeling among the participants in this study that appointments were ad-hoc at best, and

4 depended on existing contact networks. This point was illustrated by participant four who

5 highlighted that:

6   Appointments occur through word of mouth and recommendation. I don't think I have

7   ever seen an advert for a sport psychologist in County cricket. There's obviously the

8   fact that the ECB advertise for their national roles, but I've never seen, in seven years,

9   six and a half years, whatever, I don't think I've ever seen a county psychologist job

10   advertised.

11 This lack of advertising is problematic as it often leads to a lack of formalization to the role,

12 or clarity in terms of the job specification, the specific role, and associated performance

13 indicators.

14 **Proposed changes**

15   A range of desired future changes within the sport were outlined by the participants in

16 the study. These included more CPD opportunities coordinated by the NGB. Part of these

17 proposed CPD developments included the development of stronger communication links

18 between the NGB practitioners and those individuals working in specific clubs. For example,

19 participant two suggested:

20   I think obviously sharing practice is important, but how do you do that on a regular

21   basis when people are so busy? I haven't necessarily got an answer for that, but I think

22   sharing practice is good, but all that is driven by maybe these common pillars that

23   don't really exist at the moment.

1　There was also a view that, in light of the challenges and demands of the role a greater

2　understanding of mental health issues, assessment, and referral mechanisms would be

3　beneficial. This point was highlighted by participant two who stated:

4　　　There is a need for training on managing mental health, wellness, and developing a

5　　　referral network. Regardless of your qualifications, I'm not sure training as a sport

6　　　psychologist with a performance focus prepares you for that. So I think yeah, that

7　　　would be quite useful, having access to that kind of CPD.

8　This point was also supported by participant five who reflected that:

9　　　Understanding at what point you maybe would make a referral, maybe even

10　　　understanding, you know better understanding of some of these sort of quite unique

11　　　responses to injury, which again you know in terms of our sort of traditional paths

12　　　within sport science and sport psychology probably are insufficient in my view.

13　Also, there was a desire for much closer integration between the clubs and the NGB with

14　more sharing of information and practices, and potentially joint intervention delivery. This

15　point was articulated by participant one who stated:

16　　　At the moment no-one asks me 'what have you been doing with them, what type of

17　　　work have they undertaken'? Similarly, I'm none the wiser as to what happens when

18　　　they get to the national squads. It's almost like, a cocooned world where I think

19　　　nothing gets shared, nothing gets transmitted back to the counties, for sure, not in my

20　　　knowledge anyway. If the communication was better we could achieve more

21　　　collaboratively.

22　There were also requests by participants for the development of a specific job description that

23　could be championed / communicated by the NGB. The view of participants was that this

24　would help to provide clarity to the clubs, and help to clarify the role of the sport psychology

25　practitioner and to manage stakeholder expectations. Finally, there was also a feeling that to

1   be truly effective there needed to be the development of more permanent and full-time sport

2   psychology practitioner positions in the clubs. This perspective was illustrated by participant

3   seven who suggested:

4   There is more than enough work here to be full-time. Just at the academy level with

5   the different age groups and squads. If I was full-time we could make a real difference.

6   Providing on-going education and support to the players, to help to work both with

7   and through the coaches, and to profile and monitor psychological factors relating to

8   both performance and mental health. At the moment there is simply not enough time.

9   But the club are just not aware of what they are missing, which is a real problem.

10   **Discussion**

11   The results in this study suggest that the lack of role clarity for sport psychology

12 practitioners is a significant factor limiting the ability of practitioners within cricket to

13 maximize their impact and to provide the best service to their clients. This lack of clarity is

14 particularly problematic as contemporary thinking on external practitioner effectiveness

15 within the business consultancy world has highlighted the importance of clarity in roles,

16 responsibilities and expectations in determining consultancy effectiveness (Chrusciel, 2004).

17 This outcome suggests that greater emphasis is required within the UK to enhance client

18 group understanding of the profession and associated roles (Woolway & Harwood, 2015). A

19 lack of job clarity has been reported as a key organizational stressor in associated fields such

20 as sports coaching (Olusoga, Butt, Hays & Maynard, 2009) and in turn could impact upon the

21 practitioner's broader mental health. To date there is little research exploring organization

22 stress and stressors for sport psychology practitioners, and as such future research needs to

23 explore these key issues in greater detail.

24   A lack of job security and the part-time nature of the role, as demonstrated by short-

25 term contracts, was also highlighted as a key factor by participants. These challenges have

1   also been highlighted in other sport psychology contexts (Zakrajsek, Steinfeldt, Bodey,

2   Martin, & Zizzi, 2013). This lack of job security has been highlighted as having the potential

3   to have a profound effect on the practitioners' decision-making and the actions taken, such as

4   challenging people or prevailing beliefs within the environment (Hackford & Schinke, 2017).

5   Reduced job security is problematic as research suggests that it can impact upon the

6   practitioners' ethical position and perceived moral duty, resulting in decisions to maximize

7   being retained rather than because it is the right thing to do (McDougall et al., 2015). The lack

8   of job security can also have a negative impact upon working practices, often by having a

9   negative impact upon work-life balance (Fleetwood, 2007). In particular there is a danger for

10 self-employed practitioners to commit to long working weeks (Kodz et al., 2003). Which, can

11 result in reduced time for socializing, exercise and family (Guillaume & Pochic, 2007). Job

12 insecurity has also been linked to lower job satisfaction, a greater incidence of physical health

13 conditions, higher levels of psychological stress, and reduced job performance (Probst &

14 Lawler, 2006).

15   The perceptions of the client group were highlighted as being an important variable

16 influencing the potential for the sport psychology practitioner to be successful. In particular

17 the degree to which the practitioner was perceived to be trustworthy; a factor that has been

18 shown to be important in the client-practitioner relationship in other domains (Sharp &

19 Hodge, 2013; Sharp, Hodge & Danish, 2015). Another key factor that emerged in this study

20 was the difference perceptions of the sport psychology practitioner experienced when

21 working with the different age groups within the county. Generational differences in the

22 perceptions of the sport psychology practitioner have also been highlighted in other sporting

23 environments (Cruikshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009). Indeed, these

24 differences in perception reflect the fact that sport psychology has typically been received

25 better at lower levels of sport (as opposed to elite levels - Cruikshank & Collins, 2013).

1   A further significant issue highlighted in this study was a lack of understanding by

2   client groups of what being qualified in sport psychology actually means. This issue has been

3   highlighted as being problematic within cricket (Cotterill, 2017) and more broadly within

4   sport (Hamberger, & Iso-Ahola, 2006; Woolway & Harwood, 2015). In the UK there is a real

5   lack of clarity for the clients in terms of who they should appoint and what to look for

6   (Woolway & Harwood, 2015). The profession as a whole needs to invest significant time and

7   effort to reduce ambiguity in order to protect the public and ensure services are delivered by

8   appropriately qualified practitioners.

9   Due to the nature of the county club setting the participants in this study needed to

10   develop good working relationships with a range of stakeholders in order to be effective. The

11   development of multiple relationships has previous been suggested as being essential in sport

12   psychology practice (McDougall et al. 2015). Failure to maintain these important

13   relationships has been suggested as detrimental to practice, and could ultimately jeopardize

14   the tenure of the sport psychology practitioner (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The role

15   of the sport psychology practitioner has evolved into a challenging hybrid role where

16   interventions with athletes are supplemented by a provision of service that extends to the

17   multiple clients (e.g., coaches and support staff) that inhabit the environment (Moore, 2003;

18   Nesti, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015). This broader role though is often not factored into the

19   contractual agreement, increasing overall workload. This ambiguity is often a result of a lack

20   of clarity regarding roles and outcomes in the negotiation of work. There is an expanding

21   evidence-base that suggests that just focusing on working with athletes is not sufficiently

22   impactful at high levels of sport (Cruikshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009;

23   Nesti, 2010; McDougall et al., 2015) and is becoming increasingly obsolete at this level

24   (Nesti, 2010). As a result, programs that seek to train and develop sport psychology

25   practitioners need to consider how to develop the skills and expertise required to be able to

1   achieve this level of impact and influence.

2   A significant reoccurring theme in this study was the issue of the available time to

3   work with the players. The amount of time available to work with the players is important as

4   it can directly impact upon the scale of intervention and change the practitioner is seeking to

5   achieve (Gould, Murphy, Tammen, & May, 1991). Time with the clients is a further concern

6   as the duration of time can impact upon the quality of the relationship between the

7   practitioner and the client (Werr & Styhre, 2002). This factor is particularly important as this

8   working relationship has been highlighted to be a significant component of the ultimate

9   success of the consultancy (Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp & Hodge, 2013). Further

10   building on this point, rapport, respect and trust have also been highlighted as crucial to

11   successful consulting (Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015), all of which are dependent on the time

12   with the client.

13   Finally, the study highlighted a number of issues relating to the advertisement,

14   selection and employment of sport psychology practitioners. Issues in terms of the types of

15   contracts offered have been highlighted previously in this discussion. However, concerns

16   were also raised by participants regarding the process of employing a sport psychology

17   practitioner. Many participants suggested that there is a lack of transparency in terms of the

18   advertisement and recruitment of practitioners. Indeed, the norm appears to be that positions

19   are not advertised, something that has been highlighted in sport more broadly (Ball, 2005).

20   This lack of advertising is problematic as it often leads to limited formalization of the role, or

21   clarity in terms of the job specification, the specific role, and associated performance

22   indicators (Breaugh & Sarke, 2000). Limited clarity in terms of the role is problematic for

23   both the client/employer and the practitioner (Burgess & Connell, 2006). Not advertising

24   positions more broadly is particularly problematic for the employer in this domain. As

25   previously highlighted there is a lack on understanding regarding what being appropriately

1   qualified means, which may result in individuals who lack appropriate qualifications and

2   training being contracted (Hackfort & Schinke, 2017). This issue could be mediated

3   somewhat with a range of candidates to choose from, but without this choice (through formal

4   advertising) the employer could end up with a sub-optimal service, potentially at a high

5   financial cost (Department of Health, 2010). The presence of this issue suggests that greater

6   guidance is required from the cricket NGB regarding who to employ and how to appoint. Also

7   the sport psychology profession in the UK needs to better articulate who sport psychology

8   practitioners are, the qualifications they have, and the job they should do (Minniti, & Van

9   Raalte, 2016).

10   **Limitations and future research directions**

11   The current study used a sample of sport psychology practitioners working within

12   professional cricket. The structure of the sport with the use of developmental academies and

13   professional squads is similar to some other professional sports such as soccer and rugby

14   union. As a result, some of these finding might also be replicated within these others sports.

15   However, while this is the case cricket is quite a unique sport in terms of its structure, the

16   nature of the competitive season and the size of the off season. As a result caution is required

17   when considering the impact of these data beyond cricket. Future research could explore the

18   experiences of sport psychology practitioners in other sports to explore whether similar

19   experiences, challenges and opportunities exist. Also, while the use of Skype video calls was

20   required to be able to collect the data this method could have impacted upon rapport between

21   the researcher and the participant, and as a result could have influenced the depth of reflection

22   and disclosure (Hanna, 2012).

23   It was beyond the scope of the current study but it would be interesting to explore the

24   player and coach/support staff perceptions along with those of the sport psychology

25   practitioners. Indeed, future research should seek to explore the interaction of these different

1   perspectives to better understand the nature of the performance environment. There is also the

2   potential to utilize a more diverse range of methods to better understand practitioner

3   experiences. Complementary techniques could include observation or diary approaches as

4   novel sources of information or as a way to triangulate the findings from the interviews.

5   **Practical implications**

6   The sport of cricket in the UK appears to be increasingly open to accessing sport

7   psychology services. However, current working practices are impacting upon both the

8   experiences of sport psychology practitioners and the relevant employers. The lack of clarity

9   in terms of job description, responsibilities and performance indicators makes it difficult for

10   the sport psychology practitioners to fulfill the role and meet the expectations of their clients.

11   Longer-term planning is also difficult due to the short-term transient nature of the work.

12   The sport psychology professional bodies in the UK need to work more closely with

13   sports such as cricket to enhance the understanding of the profession, the job sport

14   psychology practitioners do, who to recruit, and how to determine success. These

15   developments would provide a solid foundation to enhance the impact of sport psychology

16   provision within cricket across all level.

17   Finally, there is also work to do in order to enhance end-user understanding of the

18   benefits of employed sport psychology practitioners rather than external consultants.

19   Ultimately, a greater understanding of the profession has the potential to further enhance the

20   positive impact that practitioners can have across the whole club.

21   **Conclusion**

22   In Conclusion, the current study suggests those involved in the profession of sport

23   psychology in the UK have a significant way to go in order to develop client group

24   understanding of the profession, the required qualifications, and the associated roles that

25   qualified practitioners can fulfill. This lack of understanding currently manifests itself in a

1   lack of role clarity and limited job security; that can in turn impact upon practitioner role

2   performance and decision-making. Finally, there is a lack of understanding within the field of

3   sport psychology regarding the organizational stressors that impact upon the sport psychology

4   practitioner, their mental health, and performance in the role. As a result, future research

5   needs to explore these stressors from the perspective of the sport psychology practitioner.

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