Practitioners' use of motivational interviewing in sport: A qualitative enquiry

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of motivational interviewing (MI) in sport contexts by experts in that approach. Specifically, to understand which aspects of the MI approach are deemed valuable for working in sport, and begin to understand how these aspects are best applied. Nine practitioners participated in semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis identified themes related to core and sub-components of MI (e.g., relational spirit, technical microskills, applied tools and the MI communication styles continuum). Additional themes relate to integrating MI with other interventions, challenges of working with athletes (e.g., mandated attendance, ambivalence about change) and unique aspects of working in sport contexts (e.g., frequency, duration and location of contact points). Participants also outlined essential ingredients for an MI training curriculum for practitioners in sport. This counseling approach appears to have valuable relational and technical components to facilitate the building of the therapeutic alliance, enhance athlete readiness for change, and support delivery of action-orientated interventions in applied sport psychology.

Key words: *motivational interviewing; applied sport psychology; therapeutic alliance; ambivalence; integration*

Introduction

The relationship between sport psychology practitioners and their athlete clients is consistently recognised as very important for the outcomes of sport psychology consultancy, (e.g., Andersen & Speed, 2010; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999; Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015). Nevertheless, what is required in the discipline is greater clarity on how to cultivate and maintain these working alliances, beyond broad descriptions of rapport building and verbal and non-verbal communication. In this regard, repeated recommendations have been made for sport psychology to learn from wider disciplines within psychology (Andersen & Speed, 2010; Petitpas, Giges, & Danish, 1999), with limited sources delineating specific relational and technical communication skills for sport psychologists (e.g., Katz & Hemmings, 2009; Longstaff & Gervis, 2016; Murphy & Murphy, 2010; Watson, Hilliard, & Way, 2017).

One approach which seeks to maximise the working alliance, and is starting to receive attention in applied sport psychology (Mack, Breckon, Butt, & Maynard, 2017; Mack, Breckon, O'Halloran, & Butt, 2019; Turner et al., 2019, Wood, Mack, & Turner, 2020), is motivational interviewing (MI; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). MI is a counseling therapy which was founded on the principles of client-centred psychotherapy of Carl Rogers (1959), yet is different to traditional Rogerian counseling, in that it is intentionally directional (Markland, Ryan, Tobin, & Rollnick, 2005). Guided by its underlying 'spirit', MI primarily facilitates the building of an interpersonal relationship between practitioner and client, and aims to resolve ambivalence towards behavioral change. Initially applied as a pre-treatment to action-orientated intervention work on substance addictions (Miller, 1983), MI was conceived not from testing empirically-driven hypotheses, but phenomenologically

from intuitive clinical practice, as an alternative to the more confrontational styles of therapy which were prominent at the time (Miller & Rose, 2009).

Breckon (2015) offers an extensive description of the core elements of MI: the relational component (spirit) which consists of partnership, acceptance, compassion and evocation; the technical component (microskills) which mobilises the spirit, known by the acronym OARS - open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, summaries; the four+ processes (engaging, focussing, evoking, planning, maintaining) within which the relational and technical components are actualized; and the language of behavior change (change talk, sustain talk).

Psychotherapy research has repeatedly concluded that therapists who form stronger alliances with their patients show better treatment outcomes than therapists who form weaker alliances (e.g., Baldwin et al., 2007; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000; Wilmots, Midgley, Thackeray, Reynolds, & Loades, 2019). MI acknowledges conceptual differences between relational and technical components, and offers a philosophy of professional relationship development and maintenance, and techniques to achieve those aims, in keeping with working alliance theory (see Hatcher & Barends, 2006). Many of the therapist attributes and techniques associated with strong alliances reported by Ackerman and Hilsenroth (e.g., exploring, reflecting, providing accurate interpretations, and affirming; 2003) can be found within the MI approach (e.g., Miller & Moyers, 2015, Table 1, p. 408; Miller & Rollnick, 2013), not least the value of empathy and engagement with clients (Miller & Rose, 2009). Similar attributes and techniques have been repeatedly outlined as ideal for sport psychology practitioners (e.g., Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2015). What appears to be sparse in applied sport psychology literature is not the importance of demonstrating engagement, forming working alliances and

communicating effectively with athletes (e.g., Sharp & Hodge, 2015), but explanation of the fundamental processes or mechanics of achieving these things, i.e., the *how* of alliance building and intervention delivery. This is a gap that MI can fill potentially, particularly for students and neophyte practitioners in sport and exercise psychology. One further contribution that MI may make to applied sport psychology could be a framework to underpin the action-orientated approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapies and strategies, which are dominant in the discipline. This integration was, in fact, the purpose of MI upon its conception, with the MI spirit (ways of *being*) supporting the techniques (ways of *doing*) of other approaches (Miller & Rose, 2009). An MI-CBT integration is becoming understood in other areas of psychology (e.g., Naar & Safren, 2017), and this is perhaps where sport psychology could seek guidance on how to effectively integrate these complimentary approaches on a common factors, assimilative or theoretical level, as opposed to eclectically combining tools and techniques from multiple approaches with little regard for their underpinning theories (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005).

Mack and colleagues (2017) identified a limited use and understanding of core elements of MI by applied sport psychologists, but a significant role for MI in sport psychologists' work - including the use of MI as a stand-alone or an integration with other approaches. Subsequently, Mack et al. (2019) shared a single session case study outlining the use of MI with one professional athlete. Therefore, the aims of the current study were to provide an in-depth exploration of which components of the MI approach underpin expert practitioners' work in sport, and to begin the process of understanding the application of these components, for example to enhance verbal communication, facilitate alliance formation and maintenance,

increase athlete readiness for intervention, or in conjunction with other psychotherapeutic approaches.

Method

Participants and sampling

Nine practitioners took part in data collection. To qualify for inclusion, participants were required to have extensive knowledge of, and experience in applying MI, and be doing so in a sporting context. The Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT; www.motivationalinterviewing.org) provides training internationally for practitioners wishing to become trainers in MI, and determines the content and curriculum for MI training globally. MINT has a rigorous application process for new members, and membership of MINT was therefore used as an indication of knowledge and experience in MI, and was deemed essential for inclusion in this study.

A purposeful sample (Patton, 2002) of 16 MI practitioners known within the research team's network, and thought to be using MI in a sporting context, were contacted via email to participate voluntarily in this study. Further, four practitioners responded to a public message broadcast on the MINT eForum (self-recruited sampling; Gomm, 2008) and six practitioners were recommended to the primary researcher by practitioners from the initial round of sampling (snowball sampling; Patton, 2002). This represents an exhaustive initial sample, on a global scale, of practitioners thought to be applying MI in a sporting context. Of these 26 practitioners, 17 were eliminated due to failing to satisfy inclusion criteria, or being unresponsive to repeated requests to participate. This gave a final sample size of nine participants, based around the world (two in Australia; five in the U.S.A.; two in mainland Europe). Participants came from a range of educational and training

backgrounds, including clinical psychology (n=1), health psychology (n=1), sport psychology (n=3), counseling (n=2) and sport coaching (n=2). All participants were members of chartered societies and governing bodies of their relevant fields (e.g., Australian Psychological Society; Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision; National Association of Social Workers). Finally, all participants were applying MI in a sporting context, in roles such as head coach, sport psychologist, addictions counselor, and MI trainer. The sample comprised of seven males and two females, aged between 32 and 53 years (41.2 ± 6 years). Participants had between 4 and 23 years of experience (13.2 ± 6.9 years) in their respective fields. Finally, participants were working with a range of athletes, including amateur (e.g., club, high school), college (e.g., National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)), professional (e.g., National Football League (NFL); Major League Baseball (MLB); Australian Football League (AFL)), and Olympic level.

Procedure

Those recruited were sent participant information, participant consent forms and a demographics questionnaire prior to their interviews. Voluntary, written, informed consent was received from all participants. Ethical approval was provided by the governing institution of the research team (HWB-2016-17-S&E-13, Sheffield Hallam University). Data were collected in the form of semi-structured qualitative interviews, which were conducted by the principal researcher. The semi-structured nature of the interviews permitted the interviewer to deviate from the interview guide, to explore novel concepts as and when they arose (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conducted using internet-based conferencing software (Zoom; https://zoom.us/), as this was a sample of international participants. All interviews were audio recorded on a manual Dictaphone. Audio recordings were then transcribed (converted to written

form) verbatim, which initiates immersion in, familiarity with and reflection on the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2019), and can mark the beginning of the data analysis process (Emerson & Frosch, 2004).

Interview guide

The interview guide was designed deductively, in that it was informed by existing MI theory, but with flexibility to ask spontaneous, probing questions. Each member of the research team contributed to the development of the final interview guide. Questions in the interview guide focused on key aspects of the application of MI, including the application and relevance (to sport contexts) of MI spirit, MI technical skills, MI processes, eliciting change talk, managing ambivalence and discord, and integrating MI with other approaches.

Data analysis

As latter participant interviews were being conducted, and former interviews were being transcribed verbatim from audio recordings, the primary researcher began to suspect that data saturation (e.g., Saunders et al., 2018) had been reached. This was due to a repetition of responses given by participants in earlier interviews. Therefore, additional participants were not initially sought prior to commencement of data analysis. This impression of data saturation was strengthened as interview transcription was completed, and after performing several initial sweeps of the transcriptions to become familiar with the data, though without being pre-emptive regarding what would eventually constitute themes (Saunders et al., 2018). Data saturation was subsequently discussed and agreed upon within the research team as data analysis progressed.

In order to gain a clear understanding of how MI is being applied in sport, a deductive to inductive thematic analysis of the data was conducted in two phases

(Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2019) by the primary researcher. In line with the deductively-designed, a priori interview questions determined by broad MI core components and language (e.g., Miller & Rollnick, 2013) an initial deductive sweep of the data was performed. The purpose of this was to identify responses related to the MI core components of spirit (e.g., partnership, empathy), microskills (e.g., reflections, affirmations), four+ processes (e.g., engaging, focussing) and language of change (e.g., change talk, sustain talk). In the second phase, transcripts were analysed inductively to identify, analyse and report novel themes from the data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013) which did not fall immediately within the MI core components, such as communication styles and traps to avoid, and applied tools of MI.

The primary researcher extracted codes consisting of discrete, original participant responses from interview transcripts, and grouped codes of similar meaning to create sub-themes, using spreadsheet software (Microsoft Excel). A similar process was executed on a sample of interview transcripts by other members of the research team. Sub-themes were discussed, discrepancies were addressed and codes were re-grouped within the research team, until consensus was reached that the shared meaning of codes within each sub-theme was consistent, and had been labelled appropriately (Braun & Clarke, 2019). A similar process took place to group sub-themes in order to construct themes, and to label themes in ways which both accurately captured theme content and would be most meaningful for the reader. The research team included two practitioners who are trained in MI, and two who are not, whose analysis of interview transcripts was therefore not lead by prior MI knowledge. This assisted with reducing researcher bias in the data analysis.

Throughout the analysis, MI-specific language has been used where possible to label themes and subthemes, to maintain clarity and consistency with existing MI literature, and the MI practitioner training process. Novel themes which were constructed were labelled accordingly with new terminology. In keeping with previous articles (e.g., Sharp, Hodge, & Danish, 2019) themes and sub-themes are presented briefly in Tables 1-4, in conjunction with thick descriptive quotes from participants to provide detail and context for the reader. Quotes were chosen based on how accurately they captured the shared meaning of the theme or sub-theme they represent, and those which would provide the most meaning, context and clarity for the reader. Consideration was given to the eight criteria for excellence in qualitative research (worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, meaningful coherence) in the design, implementation, analysis and reporting of this research (Tracy, 2010). To give one example of this, to represent the perspectives and contributions of the entire sample, quotations from all nine participants, rather than a select few individuals, were chosen to add detail and context to the themes for the reader (multivocality, contained within credibility; Tracy, 2010). Participants have been identified with a label in accordance with their professional role (e.g., Psychologist 1).

Results

Participants highlighted numerous aspects of the MI approach which feature prominently in their applied work in sport, including the four core components of MI, the applied tools of MI, sharing information and expertise with athletes in an MI-consistent manner, relational and technical traps to avoid, and the MI verbal communication styles continuum. Participants also described their consideration of structure and processes of integrating MI with other approaches or interventions, and

several aspects of the MI approach which are relevant to working with athletes in brief contact, or as a team. A number of challenges associated with working in sport settings, and unique aspects of the sport environment, which give rise to opportunities for implementing the MI approach, were also described. Finally, participants shared insights on what are considered to be essential ingredients and structure of MI training for sport psychologists.

Core components of MI (Table 1)

All nine participants commented on the four core components of MI (spirit; technical skills; four processes; language of change; see Table 1), indicating that these are paramount in their work with athletes, and felt these would be relevant regardless of the context of their work. A summary of these can be seen in Table 1. All participants indicated that the spirit of MI was essential to their work with athletes, was something which drew them to the MI approach and something upon which they placed great value. For example, Psychologist 2 said, "I use a lot of MI with athletes, but one thing I always, always use is the spirit. To me, that's the most critical component."

Participants spoke of the importance of each of the technical skills, primarily complex reflections and affirmations:

> *I think what the MI training did for me was really help me sharpen my use of reflections, in particular complex reflections. I've really noticed a difference when I've been working with clients in terms of how much quicker it is to engage with the client now, and how we're getting better results than I was previously.* [Psychologist 2]

Psychologist 1 described affirmations as "something that is specific and that you're observing that's positive about an internal quality that they have." All participants

reported their use of the original four processes model (engage, focus, evoke, plan) and several spoke of a phase of maintenance or troubleshooting, which has been proposed elsewhere for addition to the original model as a fifth process (maintain), known as the four+ processes (Breckon, 2015). Participants were asked to elaborate on how they specifically apply these processes with athletes. Two points in particular were clear and recurring; firstly, that engaging is something which is ever-present, regardless of the stage in the relationship or the intervention. And secondly, that the processes do not take place in a linear, stepwise manner, but rather in a fluid, flexible, non-linear manner:

> *Let's say suddenly the athlete comes up with some kind of sustain talk that gives us a hint that maybe we are too far now in the process, do we really have the right focus here, since here comes a lot of sustain talk? Should we proceed to help this person resolve ambivalence, or should we maybe take it a bit slower and just do a big mapping of the athlete's whole situation and see what's the most important focus right now? Maybe we were a bit too quick when we tried to move further on… it's not a step by step process.*
>
> [Psychologist 4]

Regarding the language of change, participants referred specifically to change talk (athlete language in favour of behavior change), sustain talk (athlete language against behavior change), ambivalence (athlete language which indicates mixed feelings about behavior change) and resistance (athlete language which indicates a lack of readiness for behavior change). All participants stated that they are constantly listening to the language being used by their athletes regarding behavior change, and become more attuned to this the more they practise MI. Participants are consciously trying to evoke change talk from their athletes, as well as trying to

reinforce it upon hearing it. Several participants indicated that they are deliberate and selective in their responses to athlete sustain talk, opting to stay strengths-orientated and frame their responses in a way that will evoke change talk rather than reinforce sustain talk. It was acknowledged that change talk in particular tends to come primarily in the form of 'preparatory' language:

> *The form that I hear the most in terms of change talk is usually more of that preparatory change talk, that desire to change, or 'I need to change' or 'I should change', 'I should study more at night', 'I know I shouldn't be partying', 'I know I should go talk to the trainer about this injury', it's a lot of that.*
>
> [Counselor 1]

Participants generally stated that their work with athletes is primarily about applying MI in sport as they would in other settings, as opposed to a sport-specific version of MI being required. For example, Coach 2 would ask themselves, "'how effective is this, how can I use MI, the techniques or the spirit, how can MI help this conversation, this coaching session be better?'" Nevertheless, participants indicated that an intimate understanding of elite sport environments and challenges is essential, as well as athlete cultures, norms, pressures, risks and rewards. It was felt that adaptations to the MI approach may have to be made in order to fit with these, and opportunities to apply MI in sport settings may have to be actively sought. Another participant described MI as "home base", and stated, "…if I'm confused at where we are, or where we're going, I always just go back to MI" [Counselor 2]. To that end, participants commented further on how MI enhances their work in sport settings, including applied tools, sharing information and expertise, traps to avoid, challenges of working with athletes, unique aspects of the sport context, brief MI interactions,

the communication styles continuum, using MI with teams, integrating MI with sport interventions, and MI training.

MI Applied tools (Table 2)

Participants referred to several tools from the MI approach, the most common of which were scaling rulers, agenda setting, and elicit-provide (with permission) - elicit (E-P-E; see discussion for description).

> *I think that* [collaborative agenda setting] *does a couple of really useful things… you're getting a sense of what is most important for the athlete, and often we make assumptions about 'ah yes they'd like to work on this first', or 'this is most important', but by agenda setting, we're essentially asking them 'ok what's most important for you right now?', and they're then giving us that feedback which is really valuable.* [Psychologist 2]

MI-consistent sharing information and expertise (Table 2)

Participants reflected that the E-P-E format is a valuable and efficient tool for sharing key information with athletes in a respectful and collaborative manner, and that it can be used in conjunction with more instructional or educational approaches, to share information in an MI-adherent manner:

> *I think that it's much more effective if you offer it in that MI-consistent way, that E-P-E, asking what they know about imagery, cognitive rehearsal, asking if they've used it before and getting some input about that. Then saying 'would you like to hear more about it' if they don't have much knowledge about it and how it can work, then asking if it would be useful for them and in what way. When you do that, you get greater buy-in.* [Psychologist 2]

Relational and technical traps to avoid (Table 2)

Participants spoke of 'traps to avoid' from the MI approach, including the 'expert trap' (and associated 'righting reflex') and the 'premature focus trap'. One participant gave a specific example of conflicting feelings and concerns between them and an athlete who was playing through a potentially career-ending injury, and highlights how priorities can be completely different between stakeholders. This example contains the expert trap and righting reflex, sustain talk, acceptance and equipoise (Miller & Rollnick, 2013):

> *I had this gut feeling of 'oh my gosh, I just want this guy to get an MRI, I want this guy to get healthy so he can dominate at the next level' but he really felt so much like 'if I go through this and tell my coach that I'm hurt, I'm losing eligibility, I'm afraid I'm going to miss out on being drafted, if I rehab I may not get the velocity on my fastball that I had before', so it's hard for me in those instances when I feel like 'I know what's best for you', and I need to leave that feeling at the door and be willing to sit with that sustain talk, sit with some of that resistance to change, and honour it some, rather than push and go 'you've really got to get this fixed, you need to figure this out, you need to be honest with your coach' because I'm not in his shoes, I'm so removed from being there.* [Counselor 1]

Participants also described differences between praising (i.e., attaching value or making judgements about behavioral or performance outcomes) and affirming (i.e., enhancing self-efficacy, self-exploration and autonomy), and spoke generally of always striving to affirm rather than praise. Nevertheless, one participant explained being conscious of using both praise and affirmation in their role as a coach:

I use praise as a coach, and I think most coaches do, 'nice hitting, nice job there', but one thing that motivational interviewing has caused me to do is ask a question like 'how do you think that went?' and I go into MI from there, so an affirmation that I'll give them would be along the lines of 'you're thinking about this more deeply' or 'you're taking this more seriously'… [Coach 2]

MI communication styles continuum (Table 2)

Two participants, both of whom are coaches, commented on the directing-guiding-following continuum of communication, and how they attempt to stay mostly in the guiding style. The first of these participants acknowledged that this is openly discussed between coaches during their coaching sessions:

I think it's important to have a guiding style, like 95% of the time… And I talk to my colleagues about this as well, 'we have to be more guiding now', 'now is time to be more directive'. Often if we have been directive we have to go quickly back to the guiding style. [Coach 1]

The other participant acknowledged that there are times when they have to be directive in their role, but limit this to when necessary, and described a conscious process of "slipping in and out" of the MI approach [Coach 2].

Brief contact MI interactions (Table 2)

The unique settings and circumstances of sport contexts (see Table 3) give rise to conversations which participants stated could last as little as 30 seconds. This has led participants to recognise the need to be able to interact with athletes in a carefully considered way in these very brief moments:

Sometimes these conversations are two minutes long, but starting with that open-ended question, 'what were you thinking here, what was the plan?', or if I go out to the mound with a pitcher who is struggling, it's really trying to

understand better, instead of saying 'this is what you need to do, here's what you should be doing'. [Coach 2]

Using MI with teams (Table 2)

Several participants acknowledged that this was perhaps an area to which they should give more consideration. Nevertheless, two participants were able to give specific examples of their use of MI with teams. Psychologist 5 spoke in detail of their use of MI during team sessions, for example a session to resolve conflict between players and a coach:

… this team meeting, I spent 90% of it reflecting back to them. A lot of it was, 'so you don't feel like the coach is listening to you; it's frustrating that he's not asking you all what you think and just telling you what to do; so he's frustrating you because he's moving you to new positions and he's not telling you why', those kinds of things. And it built engagement like I haven't seen. [Psychologist 5]

Integrating MI with other interventions in sport (Table 2)

The suitability of MI for integrating with other approaches or interventions in sport was highlighted by all participants, who felt that as a minimum, the spirit, the technical skills and listening for change talk would probably be relevant in any circumstance:

I haven't really come across any mainstream approach that's incompatible with motivational interviewing. People can find some way to weave it in there in some form or fashion. [Psychologist 3]

When it comes to the process of integrating MI into one's applied work, what appears to be essential is having an in-depth understanding of the different approaches being integrated:

> *No matter what intervention style I'm doing, I always have motivational interviewing running in the background, and I was trained in person-centred therapy and existential psychotherapy and then moved into the more CBT-ish kind of stuff, and it* [MI] *just fits really well.* [Psychologist 3]

This participant also spoke of two options for integrating MI with an approach like CBT or interpersonal therapy, either as preparation for another intervention, or applied extemporarily when faced with, for example, ambivalence:

> *One is you just kind of do it as a precursor to CBT and then the other one is you look at the common elements and you blend them together and I think you could take a utilitarian approach.* [Psychologist 3]

Three participants shared more details of how they would integrate MI with another approach for the duration of an intervention. Psychologist 2 described a framework for underpinning action-orientated intervention work such as cognitive-behavioral strategies:

> *I see MI as the kind of framework for working with the athlete, and then cognitive behavioral strategies might be some of the tools that you use within that framework, so your mindset of working with the athlete is very much about the spirit of MI, you're using some of the techniques of MI and so forth, and then you're using the CB strategies, and you're delivering them within that framework.* [Psychologist 2]

Psychologist 4 described how their work was 'topped and tailed' with more MI-specific work, and how MI was used to support a middle phase of intervention delivery:

> *… I think I always start from MI in my approach, to explore the situation and the goal and so on… Then I'm combining my work with strategies from*

cognitive behavioral coaching, for example using mindfulness… MI is always helpful to strengthen the readiness and to strengthen the feeling of how important this is, and to strengthen confidence also… I always have a follow-up session two or three months after the last session, and in that follow-up session of course a lot of MI is the focus. [Psychologist 4]

Counselor 2 indicated both an MI-intensive period at commencement of the relationship, and the ever-present nature of MI in their work:

I tend to be heavy on MI in the beginning, because I think the spirit is what really creates the most fruitful relationship… after five or six sessions, we're moving into mindfulness strategies or CBT, or for some a lot of traumatic experiences come up, so we'll move into strategies to work through that. [MI] *is always interwoven, especially if emotions get high and an athlete needs a break, I'll go right back to just basic reflections, that's 'home base'.* [Counselor 2]

Challenges of working with athletes (Table 3)

Several participants spoke of the challenges of working with athletes, including mandated attendance, coaches wanting to know the content of sessions, stigma attached to mental health and psychology, athletes not being used to answering questions or having opinions, and athletes being mistrusting of 'outsiders'. The MI core components of spirt and technical skills were repeatedly highlighted as primary strategies in overcoming many of these challenges.

I have found that I have to lay a lot more groundwork in terms of establishing rapport and trust with athletes than I do with most of my other clients… they're so consumed with their responsibilities to the team that I'm like an outsider… it takes time to inspire trust. [Counselor 2]

Unique aspects of the sport context (Table 3)

Several participants acknowledged that interactions in sport take place in settings which are very different to other contexts (e.g., healthcare), including locker rooms, training grounds, gyms and corridors. Additionally, participants acknowledged that contact with athletes can occur with reduced frequency and significantly reduced duration compared with other settings. Examples of these include half time, time-outs and in-game situations, such as visiting a pitcher's mound during a baseball game. Psychologist 4 labelled these conversations as "MI on the go". Participant 9 highlighted how most MI work takes place 'out of the moment', for example treatment for alcohol addiction, but working in sport can involve working 'in the moment', in situations which have literally just taken place, referred to here as 'hot' issues:

> *… in baseball we're doing it often right in the moment… sometimes it's not even after, it's in the midst of it, if it's a pitcher and I've visited the mound to talk to him and he's struggling through something, and you're right in the middle of it… we use this metaphor it's 'hot', it's a hot issue and they're feeling it.* [Coach 2]

MI training for sport psychologists (Table 4)

Participants cited several aspects of the approach as being essential for training curricula for practitioners. Firstly, there was consensus from all participants that the MI core components and their constituent parts were paramount, and would need to be covered and understood in depth. Auxiliary components of the approach which were mentioned include the righting reflex, elicit-provide-elicit, demonstrating accurate empathy, maintaining practitioner equipoise (consciously deciding not to use professional expertise to influence an athlete's decision in a direction the practitioner views as optimal), and how to integrate MI with other strategies.

Practitioners indicated that this should be achieved through a combination of context-specific methods, including experiential exercises, case studies, and video samples. Further, Psychologist 2 commented on the sequence of training in MI and other more action-orientated approaches, which potentially has implications for training pathways:

> *And then once you have that pure understanding of how this framework* [MI] *might work, then it'd be introducing the cognitive behavioral strategies, because I think if you do them first, I think that people would often just jump into suggesting those, and not within the framework. So my preference would be to build the MI before the* [CB] *strategies.* [Psychologist 2]

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the components of MI which expert practitioners are applying in sport contexts, and begin to describe the application of these with athletes. Findings revealed ways in which MI can enhance the work of practitioners working in different roles in sport (e.g., psychologist, counselor, coach). Participants have confirmed that the four core components of MI (spirit; technical skills; four processes; language of change) are as pertinent to working in sport as they are to working in any other setting, something which has been questioned in previous research (Mack et al., 2017). Significant overlap can be seen between sub-components of the MI spirit (see Table 1) and components of the 'real relationship' in sport psychology as outlined by Longstaff and Gervis (2016), indicating that MI is one way for students, neophyte and established practitioners to develop and maintain these relational aspects of their practice.

The MI technical skills mobilise this spirit, helping practitioners to build engagement and demonstrate empathy (which are key predictors to success in

talking therapies; Miller & Rose, 2009), by showing that the practitioner is listening to what the athlete is saying, doing their best to understand the athlete's perspective, and prompting a raised consciousness of the actual words they are using, their meaning and the potential directions of the conversation. In psychotherapy, empathy is consistently shown to be correlated with client satisfaction and compliance with treatment, and positive outcomes of treatment, and this was recently shown also to be the case for athletic trainers working with NCAA athletes (David & Larson, 2018). Sub-components of the MI technical skills (Table 1) are clearly linked with 'general counseling skills' for developing relationships with athletes identified by Longstaff and Gervis (2016). The MI four processes can provide practitioners with a conscious structure for everything from a single consultancy or coaching session to long-term, ongoing support, as has previously been suggested (Mack et al., 2019). It was also highlighted that practitioners are considering a period of maintenance following the action/intervention phase, which may constitute a fifth process (maintenance and managing relapse) as proposed by Breckon (2015), and it may benefit practitioners in sport to be cognizant of maintenance and lapse response when implementing psychological interventions.

Practitioners spoke of constantly listening for opportunities to evoke, acknowledge or strengthen change talk from their athletes, to increase momentum towards change. The finding that athletes' change talk is usually preparatory (client language which expresses perceived desire, ability, reasons or need for behavior change) rather than mobilizing (client speech which indicates intention, obligation or steps taken to change behavior; Miller & Rollnick, 2013) shows support for previous findings on a lack of athlete readiness for change (Massey, Gnacinski, & Meyer, 2015) and that athlete resistance is a crucial but neglected aspect of sport

psychology consultancy which should be receiving greater attention (Gardner, 2017). Barriers to 'gaining entry' to athletes and teams were identified a number of years ago (Ravizza, 1988), and today there are still factors which can influence an athlete's attitudes and openness to engaging with sport psychology (e.g., gender, previous experience, stigma tolerance - see Martin, Zakrajsek, and Wrisberg (2012) for a summary). Taken together, these findings indicate that sport psychology practitioners need to be prepared to work with athletes who present initially as ambivalent or discordant, and to work with this as it arises, responding to sustain talk and ambivalence in a non-confrontational way (Apodaca et al., 2016). This has previously been identified as something which is perhaps missing in applied sport psychology in the UK (Mack et al., 2017), and may begin with a recognition that sustain talk and ambivalence towards change are naturally-occurring aspects of the change process (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Miller & Rose, 2009). Athlete reluctance to engage with sport psychology support has been acknowledged for at least 30 years (e.g., Orlick, 1989), and yet strategies for overcoming this are yet to be widely acknowledged and implemented within the discipline. The initial assumption can often be that the 'blame' for a lack of engagement or motivation lies with the athlete (Gardner, 2017), and practitioners are instead encouraged to examine their own approach and behaviors to determine if they might be contributing to athlete resistance (Tod, Hardy, Lavallee, Eubank, & Ronkainen, 2019). Such self-examination was described in a recent case study regarding an MI-rational emotive behavior therapy (REBT) intervention with an athlete (Wood et al., 2020). Athlete ambivalence and scepticism about sport psychology support arose after several consultancy sessions, when the practitioner introduced the REBT phase of work before client allegiance (Tod et al., 2019) had been achieved. Relational and

technical aspects of MI, combined with the practitioner's awareness of their role in inducing athlete resistance, proved effective for addressing these issues, and progressing the athlete to the point of readiness for intervention work. It has recently been suggested that strategies for working with athlete resistance should be factored into intervention guidelines (Latinjak, Hernando-Gimeno, Lorido-Méndez, & Hardy, 2019), which presents on way in which MI may support intervention delivery.

Participants commented on many other aspects of the MI approach beyond the four core components. The need to share information or advice in an MI-consistent way (viewing the athlete as resourceful and knowledgeable; being mindful of collaborating and supporting athlete autonomy) was highlighted repeatedly, with a need to avoid the 'expert trap' and its inherent 'righting reflex' essential to forming successful relationships. One tool for doing so which was often mentioned was the elicit-provide-elicit (E-P-E) framework, which facilitates practitioners in gathering information held by the athlete on a certain topic, then gaining permission to fill any gaps in this knowledge, and finally checking with the athlete so see how they understand this new knowledge, and what they might do with it (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The E-P-E framework has previously been approximated in applied sport psychology literature; Petitpas et al. (1999) discuss the need for psychologists to collaboratively solve problems with their athletes, by first taking time to understand the athlete's issues, and then checking to see firstly whether the athlete will accept information from the practitioner, and secondly if the athlete understands this information once it is provided. Sachs (1999) extends this idea by suggesting an additional step which takes into account the athlete's ideas for what might work for them, or even strategies which they have previously (perhaps unsuccessfully)

attempted. The EPE framework can add value to sport psychology consultancy, when applied in a skilled, considered manner.

The differences between praising and affirming (practitioner statements which value a client positive attribute or behavior, and build self-efficacy; Miller & Rollnick, 2013) were discussed. Participants stated that where possible they seek to affirm rather than praise, but occasionally (particularly in the role of a coach), there is a need to step away from this MI-adherent strategy and offer praise which may help to teach or reinforce the performance of a skill, or congratulate an athlete on their performance. This ability to consciously 'slip in and out of' the MI approach also appears relevant to the 'directing-guiding-following' continuum of communication styles (Rollnick, Miller, & Butler, 2008), which was cited here as giving participants a consciousness of which style they were adopting, and their reasons for this, and helped them determine when it was appropriate to switch from the coach or expert-like style of directing back to the MI-consistent style of guiding. Being conscious of affirming rather than praising, and of the flow of communication styles within a conversation, appears beneficial for practitioners and has recently been further supported elsewhere (Wood et al., 2020).

Participants' comments on integrating MI with other approaches have significant implications for applied practice in sport psychology. It was stated that at the very least, the MI spirit, technical skills and an awareness of athlete change talk are valuable in any circumstance and regardless of other approaches being used. This indicates that training in MI is a route to developing and maintaining one's professional philosophy, communication strategies and self-reflection in striving to cultivate meaningful professional relationships with athletes, and generate momentum towards athlete behavioral change. It is likely for this reason that MI was

described by participants in this study as 'home base'. It is noteworthy that all nine participants spoke of having at least one other approach that they applied regularly in their work with athletes, so MI was by no means regarded as a universal remedy (cf. Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

Several ways of integrating MI with other approaches were indicated, including: a precursor to an intervention deemed appropriate for the athlete's issues or concerns; a strategy for working with ambivalence or discord, should these arise; or a framework which can be used to underpin and facilitate the delivery of an intervention or ongoing support from beginning to end. Regarding the latter, this is likely a period of MI-intensive work at commencement of the relationship, followed by delivery of the appropriate action-orientated intervention supported with relevant core components from MI, and concluded with a second period of MI-intensive work for review, maintenance, or possibly to assist reassessment and reformulation processes. This comprehensive knowledge of the MI approach, and conscious consideration of the steps for integrating MI into applied sport psychology with other relevant and compatible approaches, represents a level of integration at least akin to 'assimilative integration', potentially even 'theoretical integration'. This is a step up from 'technical eclecticism' (Norcross, Karpiak, & Lister, 2005), or a 'cherry picking' or "scattergun" (Cecil & Barker, 2016, p. 63) approach, which has been proscribed by the British Psychological Society as an unsuitable approach for trainee practitioners (BPS, 2018). These deeper levels of integration can only be achieved through greater understanding of the theories, common factors and techniques of multiple approaches (Boswell, 2016), and are perhaps what practitioners in applied sport psychology should be striving for. Research has already begun to describe

such integrations of MI with different cognitive behavioral therapies in applied sport psychology (e.g., Turner et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2020).

Practitioners highlighted aspects of the sport context which create challenges when working with athletes (Table 3). Several of these were in keeping with previously identified factors which may prevent athletes from taking up or engaging fully in sport psychology support (e.g., Mack et al., 2019; Martin, Zakrajsek, & Wrisberg, 2012). MI appears to have several valuable tenets to assist practitioners in navigating these challenges. The dynamic and unpredictable nature of consultancy in the sport context also appears to create some unusual opportunities for contact with athletes, often outside pre-set appointment times and in non-clinical locations which would be typical of other contexts where MI has traditionally been applied. These contact points can also be extremely brief, perhaps a passing conversation in a corridor or changing room, and even in-game situations lasting as little as 30-60 seconds, when issues are 'hot' and performance may or may not be going according to plan. This is absolutely the briefest of brief contact consultancy, and participants were adamant that MI has a role here, by being conscious of embodying elements of the MI spirit (e.g., evocation) and focusing on the MI communication microskills (e.g., asking, reflecting, affirming).

Implications for training in MI

Participants indicated aspects of the MI approach which would be essential for a training curriculum for practitioners working in sport settings (Table 4). The general consensus that practitioners are applying MI in the context of sport, as opposed to a sport-specific version of MI, indicates that a grounding in broad MI theory and training (i.e., Tables 1 and 2) is a suitable initiation for any practitioner wishing to add MI to their applied work in sport. It was proposed by one participant

that students of sport psychology should be taught an approach like MI, with relational and technical aspects to form the therapeutic alliance, *before* action-orientated interventions. This could minimise the risk of neophyte practitioners prematurely applying the only intervention strategies they have learned so far, regardless of athlete resources or readiness and without developing a sound alliance, assessment and formulation (e.g., Cecil & Barker, 2016). This is perhaps something for professional bodies, universities and supervisors of trainees to consider.

Implications for future research

The training of practitioners in the MI approach opens avenues of possible further research. It is of course important to investigate the impact of this training on their applied practice, in terms of MI-consistency, professional relationship development (from both practitioner and athlete perspectives), and impact on desired outcomes, such as intervention goals and sport performance. But, only once competence and consistency in applying the MI approach has been achieved, reported and evidenced, can its impact in sport be truly measured. Such an investigation would likely further inform best practice guidelines, help to identify sport-specific adaptations of the approach (e.g., MI with teams; brief-contact MI with athletes), and contribute to the development of a model for integrating MI with other interventions in sport.

Strengths and limitations

Several sampling methods were employed to ensure the search for participants for this study was as exhaustive as possible, producing a global sample of practitioners who are a) working regularly in sport with amateur, international and professional athletes, and b) proficient in the MI approach, as indicated by their membership of MINT. The research team has attempted to show rather than tell

(Tracy, 2010) the reader participants' responses, using their own words and the established language of the MI approach.

There are limitations to this study, which also need to be acknowledged. It is debatable if this study has identified specific adaptations to the MI approach for use in sport psychology, for example during moments of brief contact with athletes. It is possible that this may only be achieved through action research or case studies, to identify the nuances of adapting this approach to this specific context. Additionally, the participants in this study have not provided evidence of their competence in using MI, nor their fidelity to the approach. Their comments are based on their recall and their self-assessment of their applied work. This opens their testimonies to questions of bias and accuracy, as is the case with any qualitative research of this nature. Recent research on an MI-based intervention in sport (Wood et al., 2020) has begun to address this limitation by audio recording practitioner-athlete consultations, assessing for practitioner MI competence and fidelity, and providing verbatim extracts to support practitioner assertions and reflections.

Conclusion

This study has offered the most in-depth exploration to date of the components of MI being applied by MI-proficient practitioners in sport settings, and determined that the approach has much to offer psychologists, coaches, and other practitioners working in the sport context, for whom the practitioner-athlete relationship is fundamental to their role and the success of their work. This includes the MI core components and tools, communication styles, traps to avoid and integrating MI with action-orientated interventions. More research is needed on sport-specific adaptations to the approach, including working with teams and brief contact interactions. MI is a viable option for neophyte and established practitioners

699 to develop their professional philosophies, sharpen relational and communication
700 skills for building and maintaining working alliances, and enhancing their self-
701 reflection.

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Table Titles

Table 1

Core Components and Sub-Components of MI Being Applied in Sport

Table 2

Auxiliary Aspects of MI Being Applied in Sport

Table 3

Sport Context Which Enables Opportunities for the Application of MI

Table 4

Essential Ingredients for MI Training in Sport Context

Table 1

Core Components and Sub-Components of MI Being Applied in Sport

Core Components of MI	Sub-components
Spirit	Partnership
	Build athlete autonomy
	Acceptance
	Unconditional regard
	Evocation
	Compassion
	Accurate empathy
	Equipoise
Microskills	Open Questions
	Affirmations
	Reflections (simple and complex)
	Summarising
Language of change	Preparatory change talk
	Mobilising change talk
	Sustain talk
Four+ Processes	Engage
	Focus
	Evoke
	Plan
	Maintain

Table 2

Auxiliary Aspects of MI Being Applied in Sport

Theme	Sub-themes
MI applied tools	Elicit-Provide-Elicit
	Agenda mapping
	Values sort
	Scaling rulers (importance; confidence; readiness)
	Goal setting
MI-consistent sharing information and expertise	Consider the therapeutic alliance
	Dialogue not monologue
	Collaboration
	Athlete autonomy
	Athlete as expert
	MI-adherent
	Elicit-Provide-Elicit
Relational and technical traps to avoid	Expert trap
	Righting reflex
	Premature focus trap
	Affirming not praising
MI communication styles continuum	Directing
	Guiding
	Following
Brief contact MI interactions	MI spirit is essential
	MI is adaptable to brief contact
	Short, intentional interactions
	Moment-to-moment scenarios
	Know when to direct/instruct
Using MI with teams	MI processes
	Reflections
	'Global' affirmations
	Accurate empathy
Integrating MI with other interventions in sport	Spirit
	Microskills
	Change talk
	'Home base'
	Precursor
	Common factors
	Underpinning framework
	Follow-up
	Cognitive behavioral strategies

Table 3

Sport Context Which Enables Opportunities for the Application of MI

Theme	Sub-themes
Challenges of working with athletes	Mandated attendance
	Confidentiality
	Stigma towards psychology support
	Heteronomy (athletes are unaccustomed to being asked for their opinions/answers)
	Athlete mistrust of 'outsiders'
	'Quick fix' mentality within sport
	Performance-driven environment
	Deficit view of athlete issues
	Practitioner equipoise towards athlete change
	Managing discord in the relationship
	Athlete ambivalence towards change
Unique aspects of sport context	Reduced frequency of contact
	Limited duration of contact
	Non-clinical locations
	'In the moment' contact
	'Hot' issues

Table 4

Essential Ingredients for MI Training in Sport Context

Theme	Sub-themes
MI training content	Core components of MI
	Traps to avoid
	Elicit-Provide-Elicit
	Accurate empathy
	Equipoise
	MI integration with other approaches
	Sport culture, norms, pressures
MI training design	Multi-method
	Experiential
	Sport-specific materials