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A Systematic Review Exploring the Reflective Accounts of Applied Sport Psychology Practitioners

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Abstract

This systematic review explores the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners. The aim of this review was to synthesize the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners and highlight common themes that provide focus to their reflective practice. The insight into current progress on reflective content in applied sport psychology provides a foundation to build on as we continue to understand this topic. Following a systematic search of the literature, a total of 73 studies were included within the review, which were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Analysis of the reflective accounts resulted in the creation of nine higher-order themes: *Process and Purpose of Reflective Practice*; *Ethical Practice; Supporting Person and Performer; Practitioner Individuation; Relationships with Clients; Cultural Awareness; Competence-Related Angst; Support of Practitioner Development;* and *Evaluating Practitioner Effectiveness*. The review includes recommendations for future research, such as the use of narrative analysis to provide further insight into applied practitioners' experiences. We also provide practical implications, which are tailored to match the specific demands of practitioners at different stages of development and include increased engagement in critical reflection for trainee practitioners and engaging with 'critical friends' to facilitate the process of meta-reflection for newly qualified practitioners.

Keywords: reflective practice, practitioner development, applied sport psychology, self-awareness, philosophy of practice

Sport psychology practitioners function in complex and changing environments (Cruickshank et al., 2018). To maintain effectiveness, practitioners must continually learn from real-life practice environments (Keegan, 2016). In the applied sports literature, there is consistent identification of reflective practice as a contributor to competent practitioners who are prepared to address the ambiguous challenges of sport psychology practice (e.g., Knowles et al., 2012; Martindale & Collins, 2012). While there is, an increasing presence of literature focusing on reflection in sport psychology practice, Huntley et al. (2014) summarised that there was limited depth of understanding on reflection (i.e., what it is and how to engage in it), and encouraged assimilating what practitioner-focused content we have already published as a discipline. The invitation to review accounts within the field of sport psychology practice to understand the content and process of practitioner reflection is one we accept and address in this research.

To guide our review, we adopted the following understanding of reflective practice because it captures both the nature of the activity and its translation into professional practice:

> A purposeful and complex process that facilitates the examination of experience by questioning the whole self and our agency within the context of practice. This examination transforms experience into learning, which helps us to access, make sense of, and develop our knowledge-in-action to better understand and/or improve practice and the situation in which it occurs (Knowles et al., 2014, p. 10).

This definition is explicit about examining the whole self within the context of practice to achieve a deeper meaning and understanding of who we are and how we influence sport psychology service delivery.

Sport psychology practitioners are the instruments of service delivery, which means that it is difficult to separate the person from the process of service delivery (McEwan et al., 2019; Tod et al., 2017; Wadsworth et al., 2021). In recognising the integration of the personal

and professional, Knowles et al. (2014) encourage reflection as a means by which practitioners can develop self-awareness (e.g., of their biases in the context of the professional environment). Developing high levels of self-awareness (understanding who you are, what you do, and why you do what you do) supported by the use of reflective practice can be a fundamental part of forming a professional identity (McEwan et al., 2019). Practitioners who reflect consistently and develop self-awareness of their own tendencies may enhance authenticity and ensure congruent practice (Lindsay et al., 2007).

Practitioners can better understand their core values and beliefs and how they influence the service provision process through self-awareness (Poczwardowski, 2017). Moreover, these personal core values and beliefs, which are stable across time and context, influence both practitioner philosophy and the theoretical paradigm the practitioner chooses to apply. It has been asserted that a practitioner's philosophy and theoretical paradigm combine to influence the expectations that both the practitioner and client have regarding the service provision experience (Keegan, 2016). In essence, the skill of reflective practice influences every facet of applied sport psychology (e.g., ethical standards, philosophical approach).

Synthesising and analysing practitioner accounts of reflective practice will allow us to draw knowledge together in one place. Reflecting on a synthesis of the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners may encourage meta-reflection. For example, in reference to reflecting on how personal qualities (e.g., humility; Chandler et al., 2014) contribute towards applied practice, the practitioner performing meta-reflection is asking 'how do I reflect on my personal qualities and their influence on practice?' Examining *what* (personal and professional issues) and *how* (levels of reflection; noticing, making meaning; see Moon, 1999) other practitioners reflect can encourage meta-reflection. Readers can reflect on the published accounts in respect of their own level of development. For example,

practitioners early in their careers might reflect on some of the experiences of perceived pressured in service delivery by reading Tonn and Harmison, (2004) and Wadsworth et al. (2018). Reading and asking reflective questions, such as 'how do I reflect on the issue I am currently learning about?' can provide practitioners with information to influence their professional growth. For example, reflecting on accounts of philosophy of practice (e.g., Lindsay, 2017; Tod, 2014) can aid the reader to articulate their own professional philosophy. Published accounts of reflective practice present opportunities to examine what others reflect on (and how). Meta-reflection, like reflection can also allow individuals to better understand themselves (Fletcher & Maher, 2013) within their context and so provides applied practitioners with an opportunity to generate practice-based knowledge (Cropley et al., 2010).

Although reflective articles have been a feature of sport psychology literature throughout its history, there has been no attempt to assimilate the collective published practitioners' accounts. A systematic review process would allow us to meet the call from Huntley et al. (2014) to 'take stock as a field' (p. 876) to understand better the concept of reflective practice. We intend to achieve this, by addressing the question; what do applied sport psychology practitioners choose to reflect on? The specific aim of this review is to synthesize the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners and highlight common themes that provide focus to their reflective practice. By achieving this aim, we will provide an insight into current progress on reflective content in applied sport psychology. This work will provide a foundation to build on as we continue to understand this topic. The review will provide practical suggestions and opportunities for meta-reflection on themes. To address the aim of the research, we conducted a thematic content analysis of the data (Braun et al., 2016), to describe, identify, and interpret the themes and patterns within the data.

Method

Developing Keywords for Electronic Search

We started by first conducting a scoping review to develop key search terms that would ensure a comprehensive systematic search of the relevant literature. Scoping reviews are often conducted, prior to a full systematic review, to highlight key concepts underpinning a specific research area (Peters et al., 2015). This scoping process involved reading seven reflective articles. We identified the seven reflective articles by consulting experts in the field (Pham et al., 2014) and we selected the articles because they provided an insight into the experiences of practitioners at different stages of development. We did not conduct this scoping review with the intention of capturing all relevant literature, but instead, to create the key search terms for the subsequent systematic review search (Pham et al., 2014). The lead author read the seven articles (Cecil, 2012; Collins et al., 2013; Cox et al., 2016; Haberl & McCann, 2012; Tod et al., 2015; Williams & Anderson, 2012; Woodcock et al., 2008) and highlighted key words through a method similar to that of content analysis (quantifying the presence of certain words, terms, or themes in qualitative data; Neuendorf, 2016). The lead author combined the most common key words to create the search terms (*Adaptability*, *Anxiety*, *Relationships*, *Identity*, *Reflection*, *Philosophy*, *Supervision*, *Education*, *Development*), which we then used to develop the search strategy discussed below.

Formal Search

We conducted the initial search in October 2018, which included: (a) an online search of the following electronic databases: *Web of Science; SPORTDiscus; PsychINFO; PsychARTICLES; Open Grey;* and *Scopus* using the following search terms: *Sport Psychol** AND (*Adaptability* OR *Anxiety* OR *Relationships* OR *Identity* OR *Reflection* OR *Philosophy*) AND (*Supervision* OR *Education* OR *Development*); (b) a journal table of content search, which explored all of the titles and abstracts of all volumes in the following journals: *The*

Sport Psychologist; Journal of Applied Sport Psychology; Journal of Applied Sport Psychology in Action; International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology; International Journal of Sport Psychology; Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology; Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology; Psychology of Sport and Exercise; Sport and Exercise Psychology Review; and *Case Studies in Sport and Exercise Psychology;* and (c) a forwards and backwards search of all retrieved articles, which involved exploring the reference lists of all original articles found and searching for all papers that had cited the original paper found. We conducted two additional table-of-contents searches in October 2019 and February 2021 to ensure any reflective accounts published since the initial search were included in the analysis.

Our search of the electronic databases yielded 1,305 hits and, after removing duplicates and cross-referencing with the forward and backwards searches, a total of 995 potential articles remained (see PRISMA diagram in Figure 1). We then screened the final 995 articles against the inclusion criteria, which were that the paper must be: (a) a reflective account that focused on the applied experiences of sport psychology practitioners; (b) qualitative; (c) of any year; (d) English language; and (e) published. This inclusion criteria ensured we collated articles together that would allow us to meet the specific aim of the review. Following this initial screening process, we excluded 925 of the 995 articles; leaving a total of 70 articles that met the inclusion criteria required for the systematic review. We excluded a further three articles when conducting the full-text eligibility criterion, because they were not reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practice. Two of these articles focused on the supervisory experience, and one focused on the process of reflective practice itself, rather than the applied experiences of sport practitioners directly. The final pool of articles included 67 reflective accounts of applied practitioners' service-delivery experiences. The additional table of content searches conducted in October 2019 and February 2021, led to the addition of a further six reflective articles: bringing the total to 73 reflective accounts.

Data Extraction

We extracted, stored, read, and re-read the remaining 73 articles to ensure we could conduct the data extraction and data analysis processes on two levels. The lead author first extracted and recorded the: authors' name(s); date of publication; gender; experience level; topic of reflection; sport; country; and the theory underpinning the reflective account. The lead author then read the reflective accounts again to conduct the thematic content analysis. During both stages, we recorded the experience level of the authors to identify themes that were representative of the differing developmental stages of the applied practitioners. *Trainee practitioners* were identified as those individuals who had not yet achieved accreditation through their respective professional body. *Newly qualified practitioners* were those individuals who had achieved accredited status less than five years prior to writing the article. *Experienced practitioners* were identified as individuals with five or more years' experience at the point the reflective account was written (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Wadsworth et al., 2021).

Analysis of the Practitioners' Reflections

Philosophical Approach. In relation to our aim to synthesize the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners we situated this systematic review in an interpretive paradigm (Sparkes & Smith, 2013), informed by ontological relativism (the view that reality is subjective to each individual; Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and epistemological constructivism (knowledge is constructed; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Adopting this ontological and epistemological stance allowed us to explore, and understand, the meaning each sport psychology practitioner ascribed to their applied experiences (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Creswell, 2003; 2009). For example, conducting a thematic content analysis (Braun et al., 2016) on the articles allowed us to understand how the participants perceived, and made sense of, these experiences through exploring the topics they chose to reflect on.

Furthermore, conducting thematic content analysis (Braun et al., 2016) on reflective accounts of applied practice ensured we were able to discover an aspect of each practitioners' view of reality, through gaining an understanding of their background, beliefs, and experiences (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2011). Adopting this approach to data analysis across all 73 reflective accounts allowed us to collate common experiences of applied practitioners and gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Morehouse, 2011) by uncovering both individual and collective experiences (Cohen et al., 2007).

Analysis Procedure. The procedure we used during the data analysis phase of this systematic review followed Braun et al's. (2016) thematic content analysis. We used thematic content analysis as a method of data analysis to better understand the experiences of applied practitioners (Cohen & Manion, 1994), by focusing on the aspects of the practitioners' experiences which we felt were meaningful to discuss (Creswell, 2003). Thematic content analysis also allowed us to identify and create patterns of meaning across the data set. The creation of patterns provided us with the opportunity to gain an insight into the shared experiences of applied sport psychology practitioners and meet the specific research aim of the review (Braun et al., 2015).

During Phase One the lead author immersed himself within the data set by reading and re-reading the 73 reflective accounts (consisting of 821 pages) and highlighting any areas of interest in relation to the research aim. During Phase Two, the lead author built upon these areas of interest by creating raw codes. After reading and re-reading the 73 articles, the lead author identified and created 438 raw codes. We approached these phases with a semantic focus (coding the explicitly stated ideas and experiences of the practitioners; Braun et al., 2016). During Phase Three we combined these 438 raw codes into 110 unique codes by 'tagging' raw codes, with the same or similar meaning, and grouping them together in an excel document. For example, the raw codes; *working with coaches to have more of an*

impact with players, working through the coaches is essential to successful service delivery, and *building effective relationships with coaches* were combined to create the unique code *working with, and through, coaches to support the athlete.* We also marked each code to denote the experience level of the practitioner. We grouped unique codes, representing similar ideas, to create lower-order themes. We combined the 110 unique codes to create 28 lower-order themes. For example, we combined *working with, and through, coaches to support the athletes, delivering and disseminating to key stakeholders, and communication and collaboration with support staff* to create the lower-order theme *working with support staff*. During Phase Four we focused on reviewing the lower-order themes in relation to the overall purpose of the research (what were the collective experiences of applied sport psychology practitioners?). Throughout Phase Five we focused on re-assessing the names of the lower-order themes and highlighting the essence or unique aspect of each theme. We did this to ensure each theme was distinct from the next, but also to understand, and better capture, the interconnectedness of all the themes in relation to the overall experiences of the practitioners (Braun et al., 2016). Hence, this phase allowed us to move beyond simply describing individual ideas and provided us with the opportunity to present the collective experiences of the practitioners in line with our research aim and our ontological and epistemological stance. In Phase Six, we grouped the lower-order themes together to create nine higher-order themes that were representative of the experiences of applied sport psychology practitioners. For example, we combined the six lower-order themes: *understanding the demands of elite sport; immersion (and integration) into the environment; informal work with athletes; understanding the culture; working with support staff;* and *lack of contact time with athletes* to create the higher-order theme *Cultural Awareness*. We used a 'thematic map' (in the form of a table; consisting of unique codes, lower-order themes, and higher-order themes) to help us with this process (see Table 1.).

Insert Table 1. here

Data Representation. Once we had created the higher-order themes, we focused on identifying the themes that represented the unique experiences of practitioners in a particular stage of development. For example, the theme *Competence-Related Angst,* better represented the experiences of trainee or early career practitioners. Presenting the themes in this way helped us identify specific experiences associated with the different development stages.

Results

Following the thematic content analysis of the 73 articles; we created 28 lower-order themes, which we combined to create nine higher-order themes (see Table 1.). We present an overview of the themes below, focusing on the meaning of each theme and which group (trainee, newly qualified, or experienced) generally reflected upon this area. We have presented the higher-order themes in the order below to support our earlier conceptualisation of reflective practice (starting with the examination of the whole self and moving towards an understanding of how the self interacts with the context; Knowles et al., 2014).

Process and Purpose of Reflective Practice. Trainee practitioners wrote 19 (26%) of the reflective accounts, ten (14%) were written by newly qualified practitioners, and 44 (60%) were written by experienced practitioners. Authors reflected on a variety of different topics, such as: providing one-to-one support; developing a life skills programme; working with young athletes; and attending major international competitions. 18 (22%) of the articles explicitly mentioned the use of a reflective model to structure their reflective accounts. The higher-order theme itself was made up on three lower-order themes; *developing self-awareness and self-knowledge, learning is a continuous process,* and *creating an awareness of transference and countertransference,* which were underpinned by 12 unique codes. Applied practitioners stated that they engaged in reflective practice for different reasons, such as: increasing self-awareness (Woodcock et al., 2008); enhancing and maintaining

development (Tod, 2014); and directing attention towards the practitioner-client relationship (Tod, 2007).

Developing Self-Awareness and Self-Knowledge. A consistent feature, usually presented at the start of the reflective accounts, was a focus on the self and the importance of understanding core values and beliefs (Cox et al., 2016). Applied practitioners discussed engaging in reflective practice to gain a better insight into who they were as both people and practitioners (Cecil, 2014). We theorised that engaging in reflective practice for this purpose provided the practitioners with the opportunity to develop a professional identity; grounded in their own values and beliefs (Cox et al., 2016; Williams & Anderson, 2012). Moreover, this increased self-knowledge and self-awareness allowed applied practitioners to navigate and overcome the many barriers of delivering sport psychology support in elite environments (Ross, 2015).

Learning is a Continuous Process. There was also a consistent focus on the links between reflection and continual development as a practitioner (Gordon, 2014). Experienced practitioners in particular focused on the importance of reflective practice in viewing learning and development as a continuous, constant, and on-going process (Fifer et al., 2008; Giges, 2014). We speculated that practitioners used reflective practice to assess their own developmental needs, ensuring they engaged in purposeful and meaningful continued professional development (CPD) opportunities (Carr, 2007).

Creating an Awareness of Transference and Countertransference. We also speculated that reflective practice allowed practitioners to become more aware of how their own motivations and needs might be influencing the relationship developed with the client (Tod, 2008). Applied practitioners reflected on their need to ‘protect’ their clients (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014; Wadsworth et al., 2019), becoming more aware of the power dynamic between themselves and their clients (Tod, 2007), and how this understanding made them

more conscious of potential transference and countertransference (Anderson, 2014; Tod, 2007).

Ethical Practice. Ethical practice was a central feature of the reflective accounts and explicitly mentioned by applied practitioners as a fundamental component to successful service-delivery (Moyle, 2015). This higher-order theme was made up of three lower-order themes; *ethical dilemmas are challenging and uncomfortable, negotiating with the media and self-promotion,* and *staying humble*, which were underpinned by 12 unique codes.

Ethical Dilemmas are Challenging and Uncomfortable. Applied practitioners, working in a sporting context (regardless of experience level), faced an abundance of ethical challenges, which in most cases were successfully navigated. However, these ethical dilemmas provoked emotive reactions in the practitioners and reinforced that ethical practice should be considered as an essential and foundational component of successful applied practice (Keegan, 2016). A variety of reoccurring ethical challenges were discussed in the reflective articles, such as: 'blurred boundaries' with clients (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014) (such as questioning whether or not the relationship with the client was professional or personal; Collins et al., 2013)); referring clients when their needs fell outside of the practitioners' scope of practice (Drew & Morris, 2020; Wadsworth et al., 2020); and travelling with teams (Haberl & Peterson, 2006) (leading to unexpected and unpredictable situations; Collins & Cruickshank, 2015). At a broader level, experienced practitioners in particular discussed their experiences of key stakeholders misunderstanding the discipline of sport psychology as a whole and how these misconceptions meant practitioners needed to have a greater awareness of how to act ethically with key stakeholders (Carr, 2007).

Negotiating with the Media and Self-Promotion. Newly qualified practitioners focused on the desire to build credibility (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014), while being cautious of the ethical challenges' media involvement could create (Haberl & Peterson, 2006).

Practitioners discussed how media involvement presented direct challenges to confidentiality, which would inevitably be damaging to the practitioner-client relationship (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). Practitioners discussed the need to establish clear expectations before engaging with the media (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014) and how topics needed to be addressed broadly rather than on an individual basis (Carr, 2007) to avoid further challenges to confidentiality. In addition, newly qualified practitioners discussed experiencing conflict between the need to promote their services (and gain clients) and the lack of confidence they had to sell their services (Collins & McCann, 2015) and negotiate fees (Howells, 2017) while not making false claims about competency (Fifer et al., 2008).

Staying Humble. Staying humble was discussed as another aspect of sound ethical practice. Applied practitioners highlighted the importance of not taking credit for the successes of athletes (Halliwell, 1990) and how taking credit for athletes' victories could directly challenge a practitioners' integrity and be viewed as a weakness (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). The reflective accounts also discussed how effective applied practitioners have the ability to 'blend in' and conduct work in the background without the need or want for attention or accolades (Gordon, 2014).

Supporting Person and Performer. After reading and re-reading the reflective accounts, we theorised that there were noticeable differences between earlier reflective accounts (published in 1980/90s), and more recent reflective accounts, when discussing support offered to clients. This higher-order theme was made up of three lower-order themes; *delivering mental skills training for performance enhancement, providing holistic support*, and *being client-led*, which were underpinned by 11 unique codes.

Delivering Mental Skills Training for Performance Enhancement. Reflections from experienced practitioners (published in the 1980/90s) did recognise non-sporting challenges (Dorfman, 1990; Orlick, 1989), but mostly focused on the use of mental skills training to

improve performance (Halliwell, 1990; Loehr, 1990). Experienced practitioners, within their reflective accounts, focused on portraying themselves as 'experts' through delivery of mental skills training to clients (Tod, 2008). More recently, mental skills training has been applied in closed-skill sports to simulate competitive environments (Hung et al., 2008). However, this performance-only focus, portrayed in the earlier accounts, has been criticised for limiting the field (Anderson, 2014) and has been described as 'insufficient' (Neff, 1990) and 'inadequate' (Collins et al., 2013) when dealing with the broader challenges often discussed by elite athletes.

Providing Holistic Support. More recent reflective accounts have begun to highlight the importance of holistic support (Evans & Slater, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2007; McArdle & Barker, 2016). More specifically, these accounts have attempted to understand, and demonstrate the importance of, the person behind the athlete (Evans & Slater, 2014; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006; Lindsay et al., 2007), as well as the link between performance and well-being (Johnson, 2017; Mellalieu, 2017). We theorised that this was a prominent feature of the trainee and newly qualified practitioners' recent accounts of applied practice (Collins et al., 2013; Mărgărit, 2013; McGregor & Winter, 2017; Woodcock et al., 2008). These practitioners chose to discuss the importance of understanding the person (within their social context; Woodcock et al., 2008) and how the support offered by sport psychology practitioners should be more 'lifestyle' based (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006) with a focus on the broader challenges that an individual engaging in elite sport may experience alongside more traditional performance-based challenges (Moyle, 2015). During our analysis, we developed the idea that there was a significant shift in the reflective accounts, with time, from performance focused interventions to more counselling-based approaches in support of the whole person (Pepitas, 2014).

Being Client-Led. Our theory of a shift, from performance-based interventions to person-based interventions, was further reinforced when applied practitioners began discussing their movement away from problem-focused approaches and towards a more person-focused approach. Through our analysis, we speculated that this shift occurred as practitioners began to gain more experience (Jackson, 2006). Furthermore, trainee practitioners discussed lacking the confidence to deliver an athlete-led approach (Cropley et al., 2007). However, when trainee practitioners did provide their clients with more ownership, they discussed gaining more 'buy-in' from the athletes (Rowley et al., 2012). Applied practitioners also highlighted the importance of facilitating the client to find their own solution (Lindsay et al., 2017).

Practitioner Individuation. Through our analysis, we developed the theory that practitioners, at different stages of development, were at differing stages of the practitioner individuation journey (the alignment between a practitioners' core values, beliefs, and behaviour, and the context (role) they choose to engage in, over time; McEwan et al., 2019). This higher-order theme was made up of five lower-order themes; *a philosophy of practice changes with time and experience*, *developing a practitioner identity*, *demonstrating authenticity (and experiencing congruence)*, *adopting multiple roles,* and *practitioner self-care*, which were underpinned by 20 unique codes.

A Philosophy of Practice Changes with Time and Experience. When reading the reflective accounts, we speculated that much of the work conducted by trainee practitioners was not underpinned by a specific philosophical framework (Collins & McCann, 2015) or was an imitation of a 'simple' model of practice (Lindsay, 2017), which occurred due to a lack of connection between the trainees' values and their behaviours. The newly qualified practitioners' accounts were markedly different from the trainees' accounts in this regard. The newly qualified practitioners reflected on the importance of knowing their underpinning

philosophy (McGregor & Winter, 2017) and their practice being underpinned by theory (Henrikson, 2015; Timson, 2006). The experienced practitioners were able to discuss their philosophy of practice in relation to their context, which centred around how elite sporting environments can often put practitioners under pressure to flex and change their approach (Larsen 2017a).

Developing a Practitioner Identity. While experiencing challenges in an applied context (such as, attending major international tournaments - Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014), trainee practitioners reflected on the difficulty they had in separating their personal and professional selves (Collins et al., 2013; Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Williams & Anderson, 2012) and portrayed a 'blurred identity' (Cox et al., 2016). Alternatively, the experienced practitioners discussed becoming more relaxed around their clients and not feeling the need to separate their personal and professional selves (Andersen, 2014; Tod, 2014). We developed the idea that this lack of separation between personal and professional selves, with time, and more exposure to applied experiences, allows practitioners to develop a clear and authentic professional identity (Lindsay, 2017; Moran, 2014).

Demonstrating Authenticity (and Experiencing Congruence). Without a clear professional identity, the trainee practitioners inevitably began to experience inauthenticity and incongruence (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014; Haberl & Peterson, 2006; Holt & Strean, 2001; Lindsay et al., 2007; Mărgărit, 2013). In response to these feelings of incongruence, the trainee and newly qualified practitioners chose to discuss the process of becoming more authentic and honest (Lindsay et al., 2007), which helped them: build relationships with clients (Haberl & Peterson, 2006); avoid conflict and unethical behaviour (Jones et al., 2007); become more comfortable in elite environments (Chrsitensen & Aoyagi, 2014); and 'sell' themselves as practitioners (Holt & Strean, 2001). The experienced practitioners, who already

felt a sense of congruence, simply described the importance of being genuine (Fifer et al., 2008) and not hiding parts of themselves in a professional context (Tod, 2008).

Adopting Multiple Roles. Trainee and newly qualified practitioners consistently reflected upon 'wearing many hats' or adopting multiple roles within an applied setting (Collins et al., 2013; McGregor & Winter, 2017; Timson, 2006; Williams & Andersen, 2012). Applied practitioners experienced multiple and conflicting roles (such as being both the coach and the sport psychology practitioner; Neff, 1990), which were viewed positively (removing the sense of being an 'outsider'; Jones et al., 2007), but also caused confusion in relation to role clarity (Tonn & Harmison, 2004) and presented logistical challenges (Katz, 2006; Rhodius, 2006). Establishing role clarity was integral in avoiding issues of confidentiality with clients (Haberl & Peterson, 2006), but establishing role clarity was challenged when trying to find a balance between offering one-to-one support to athletes and working with staff in a more organisational capacity (Timson, 2006).

Practitioner Self-Care. In response to some of the challenges discussed above, practitioners reflected on the concept of 'self-care' (Moyle, 2015; Symes, 2014) as being a vital component to successful practitioner development and in finding an optimal work-life balance (Halliwell, 1990). Challenges to this work-life balance were experienced when: travelling to major competitions (Haberl & Peterson, 2006); feeling the need to be available on a 24-hour basis (Males, 2006); and combining an academic and practical career (Cox 2014). We speculated that this lack of balance (often resulting in lack of time to sleep and exercise; Haberl & Peterson, 2006) made it difficult for practitioners to find 'down-time' (Males, 2006) and had emotional and psychological implications, such as, increased stress and pressure (Jones et al., 2007).

Relationships with Clients. The importance of the relationship developed between the sport psychology practitioner and the client is well established in the literature (Sharp et

al., 2015). Developing a relationship with the client was consistently discussed as a key component of successful applied service delivery (Andersen, 2014). This higher-order theme was made up of two lower-order themes; *caring for the client* and *conducting a thorough needs analysis*, which were underpinned by 9 unique codes.

Caring for the Client. Applied practitioners discussed the importance of developing trust (Botterill, 1990) and caring for their clients (Dorfman, 1990). Practitioners reflected on how they attempted to build relationships with their clients, which included: through use of humour (Holt & Strean, 2001); through the use of technology (Jackson, 2006); by engaging informally with clients (McGregor & Winter, 2017); and by travelling to away fixtures with the squad (Tonn & Harmison, 2004). Integrating within the environment (Haberl & Peterson, 2006), understanding the culture (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017), and building relationships with coaches (Cecil, 2014) allowed practitioners to create 'buy-in' with their athletes (Cotterill, 2017). However, this process took time (Hung et al., 2008) and over time the relationships practitioners were able to build with their clients changed and became more meaningful (Tod, 2008).

Conducting a Thorough Needs Analysis. Conducting a thorough needs analysis was an essential component of the reflective accounts; allowing practitioners to understand the unique needs of their clients (Bull, 1995; Fifer et al., 2008; Mărgărit, 2013). Practitioners discussed the importance of triangulation when conducting a needs analysis (McArdle & Barker, 2016) and used a variety of methods to achieve this, such as: psychological/psychometric tests (Loehr, 1990); interviews (Hung et al., 2008); observation (McGregor & Winter, 2017); and informal chats (Fifer et al., 2008). Taking the time to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis ensured practitioners were able to create a shared working goal with their client (Tod, 2008), which allowed them to: tailor the support to the needs of their clients (Evans & Slater, 2014); adapt to changing circumstances (McArdle &

Barker, 2016); understand individual differences within a team (Cropley et al., 2007); and deliver age-appropriate interventions (Barker et al., 2011).

Cultural Awareness. Awareness of the culture was a consistent feature discussed by the experienced practitioners. Trainee practitioners did highlight the importance of immersing themselves within the environment, with the primary focus being on proving their worth (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014), but struggled to achieve this (Howells, 2017; Rowley et al., 2012). We theorised that the experienced practitioners were able to work successfully within the culture of professional sport (in comparison to the trainee and newly qualified practitioners) because of their high levels of self-awareness (Poczwardowski, 2017). This self-awareness allowed the experienced practitioners to explore, and better understand, how their professional selves fitted into the context in which they were situated (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017), allowing them to deliver effective and culturally sensitive interventions (Larsen, 2017a), and reinforcing that they were further along the practitioner individuation process (McEwan et al., 2019). This higher-order theme was made up of six lower-order themes; *understanding the demands of elite sport, understanding the culture, immersion (and integration) within the environment, lack of contact time with athletes, informal work with athletes,* and *working with support staff,* which were underpinned by 17 unique codes.

Understanding the Demands of Elite Sport. Applied practitioners discussed the importance of understanding the demands of the sport in which they were situated. The reflective accounts of experienced practitioners (particularly those published in the 1980/90s) emphasised that experience of the sport, as either a player or coach, was viewed as vital to successful service delivery (Bull, 1995; Loehr, 1990; Orlick, 1989). This past experience of the sport allowed the practitioners to integrate into the environment (Botterill, 1990) and gain 'buy-in' from their clients (Tod, 2008). Applied practitioners who had no prior history of playing or coaching the sport highlighted the importance of understanding the sport (Fifer et

al., 2008), especially in relation to the psychological demands it placed on athletes (Harwood, 2008; Hung et al., 2008). Having knowledge of the sport and the psychological demands allowed applied practitioners to locate themselves as an 'insider' (Mellalieu, 2017) and gain credibility and trust (Holt & Strean, 2001).

Understanding the Culture. In addition to understanding the demands of the sport, experienced practitioners also discussed the importance of understanding the culture in which they were situated (Lindsay, 2017; Pattison & McInerney, 2016; Tod, 2014). This was particularly important in cultures that were considered to be unpredictable (Collins & Cruickshank, 2015), such as professional football (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006), where staffs' jobs were perhaps most at risk (Larsen, 2017a) and where the masculine culture might prevent clients from showing weakness (Tod, 2008). Furthermore, understanding that athletes' identities were rooted in their context allowed practitioners to design and deliver interventions that were sensitive to the needs of the individual and the organisation (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017).

Immersion (and Integration) within the Environment. Applied practitioners (regardless of experience level) highlighted the importance of immersing themselves within the environment (Barker et al., 2011; Cox, 2014, Harwood, 2008). Not integrating and embedding themselves into the environment made it more difficult to get engagement from clients (Rowley et al., 2012). Practitioners spoke of taking part in social activities with players and staff (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014) and travelling to away games (Tonn & Harmison, 2004) as ways to improve relationships (Haberl & Peterson, 2006) and increase voluntary engagement from athletes (Rowley et al., 2012).

Lack of Contact Time with Athletes. Applied practitioners struggled to gain access to athletes (Rhodius, 2006) and found themselves unable to create enough time to engage with their clients (Cox, 2014; McGregor & Winter, 2017) and build effective relationships

(Timson, 2006). Gaining access to the athletes was made even more of a challenge during major competitions (Jackson, 2006) and in sports where the athletes' schedules were too busy for any meaningful, prolonged, or proactive engagement (Rowley et al., 2012).

Informal work with Athletes. Perhaps as a direct result of this lack of contact time with athletes, applied practitioners consistently discussed the importance of conducting informal work with their clients (Halliwell, 1990). This informal work allowed the practitioners to build relationships with the athletes (McGregor & Winter, 2017), providing the foundation for the potential of more structured work (Haberl & Peterson, 2006). Practitioners achieved this by making themselves 'visible' (Mellalieu, 2017) and by being 'present and available' (Tonn & Harmison, 2004) within their respective environments.

Working with Support Staff. Working with, and through, support staff was another way applied practitioners attempted to overcome their lack of contact time with athletes and influence the culture. Identifying, and building relationships with, key cultural influencers (Larsen, 2017b; Mellalieu, 2017) was almost exclusively mentioned by experienced practitioners as a way of: further integrating as a member of the support staff (Bull, 1995); reinforcing their 'presence' (Males, 2006); earning trust and respect (Fifer et al., 2008); and creating 'buy-in' to support the implementation of the psychology programme (Cotterill, 2017). This provided the experienced practitioners with the opportunity to impact the athletes indirectly by working with the coaches (Cotterill, 2012; Loehr, 1990), but also ensured that psychological support and provision was extended to the staff (Bull, 1995) and delivered to key stakeholders within the environment (Neff, 1990). Delivering a psychology programme to athletes and staff allowed the experienced practitioners to positively contribute towards the team culture (Moyle, 2015) and the culture of the organisation as a whole (Stambulova & Schinke, 2017) and increased their overall effectiveness as applied practitioners (Cecil, 2014; Cotterill, 2012; Mellalieu, 2017).

Competence-Related Angst. Competence-related angst was a consistent feature discussed by trainee and newly qualified practitioners in their reflective accounts. Their early applied experiences focused on feelings of self-doubt (Collins & McCann, 2015), apprehension (Katz, 2006), and pressure (Moyle, 2015). This higher-order theme was made up of two lower-order themes; *self-doubt and anxiety prior to, and during, consultancy experience* and *pressure at large tournaments and events*, which were underpinned by 12 unique codes.

Self-Doubt and Anxiety prior to, and during, Consultancy Experiences. Anxiety and self-doubt were a consistent feature of the trainee and newly qualified practitioners' reflective accounts. Their applied experiences were accompanied by anxiety, self-doubt, and uncertainty immediately prior to, and during, applied practice (Barker et al., 2011; Cropley et al., 2007; Woodcock et al., 2018). This competence-related angst was associated with concerns of incompetence (Lindsay, 2017) and the need to demonstrate competence to significant others (Giges, 2014). We speculated that for the early career practitioners, engaging in reflective practice helped them understand that anxiety did not necessarily equate to incompetence (Woodcock et al., 2008). The experienced practitioners were able to highlight that anxiety was a consistent feature of service-delivery and something that practitioners needed to accept (Tod, 2014). However, despite understanding that anxiety and self-doubt would inevitably accompany initial applied experiences, the trainee and newly qualified practitioners consistently discussed feelings of fraudulence earlier in their careers (Colins et al., 2013; Lindsay & Thomas, 2014; Williams & Anderson, 2012), which led to further feelings of helplessness (Rhodius, 2006), isolation (Lindsay et al., 2007), and the overwhelming feeling of being 'thrown in at the deep end' (Collins et al., 2013).

Pressure at Large Tournaments and Events. Attending major events, such as the Olympic games, intensified the pressure and doubts of the trainee and newly qualified

practitioners (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014; Henrikson, 2015; Moyle, 2015), which contributed to further feelings of fraudulence during the service provision process (Collins et al., 2013; Williams & Anderson, 2012). For the early career practitioners, the invitation to attend a major event, and travel with the team, provided them with the sense that they had 'made it' (Colins et al., 2013). However, supporting athletes in the build-up to these competitions, and attendance at the events themselves, also significantly increased the pressure these practitioners experienced (Brooks, 2007; Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014; Timson, 2006). Practitioners highlighted the need to deliver 'when it mattered' (Henrikson, 2015), but also reflected on their inability to stay calm and focused (Henrikson, 2015) and the increasing sense of doubt they experienced in relation to their own knowledge and competence (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014).

Support of Practitioner Development. Support was discussed by all practitioners, regardless of experience level, but was particularly emphasised in the trainee and newly qualified practitioners' reflective accounts. This higher-order theme was made up of two lower-order themes; *peer support* and *supervisor support*, which were underpinned by 8 unique codes.

Peer Support. Trainee and newly qualified practitioners highlighted the importance of sharing their experiences with empathetic peers (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014; Timson, 2006), as well as the importance of creating genuine connections with 'critical friends' (Moran, 2014) who would offer personal and professional support (Carr, 2007) and encourage continuous engagement in reflective practice (Barker et al., 2011). Engaging with 'critical friends' (Mellalieu, 2017) was viewed as particularly beneficial by the practitioners who had the opportunity to seek support from other individuals working in a similar environment to themselves (Cotterill, 2012). Engaging with peer support was viewed as essential to the on-going development of practitioners, regardless of experience level (Barker

et al., 2011; Carr, 2007), but was particularly important for the trainee practitioners in overcoming their anxiety and self-doubt (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014).

Supervisor Support. Trainee and newly qualified practitioners also highlighted the integral roles their supervisors had in their on-going development (Carr, 2007). Trainee practitioners focused on developing effective relationships with their supervisors (Cropley et al., 2007) and placed high amounts of importance of this relationship (Jones et al., 2007), which had the potential to increase their anxiety further, because of the trainees' need to portray competence to their supervisors (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014). However, the trainee practitioners mostly discussed the importance of their supervisors in overcoming this anxiety and self-doubt associated with initial service-delivery experiences (Tonn & Harmison, 2004).

Evaluating Practitioner Effectiveness. Evaluation of effectiveness was a feature of the reflective accounts regardless of the practitioners' experience level. However, we theorised that practitioners at different stages of development reflected differently on how (and in some cases why) they evaluated their practice. This higher-order theme was made up of two lower-order themes; *proving your worth as an applied practitioner,* which was discussed by trainee and newly qualified practitioners, and *judging the effectiveness of interventions,* which was discussed by newly qualified and experienced practitioners. Collectively, these lower-order themes were underpinned by 8 unique codes.

Proving your Worth as an Applied Practitioner. Within their reflective accounts, trainee practitioners focused on the need to make a difference (Woodcock et al., 2008) and the pressure to provide a solution (Tonn & Harmison, 2004; Wadsworth, 2019). As discussed earlier, this was usually because the trainee practitioners wanted to demonstrate their worth (Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014) and to overcome the anxieties associated with their early applied experiences (Collins et al., 2013). Newly qualified practitioners also had an awareness (similar to the trainees) that, because of the unpredictable nature of elite sport,

their job was always at risk and evaluation was difficult (Larsen 2017a). Newly qualified practitioners focused on the need to 'fix' problems and be the 'perfect' psychologist (Williams & Anderson, 2012). Similarly, the trainee practitioners discussed their eagerness to apply theoretical content and 'change the world' (Mărgărit, 2013).

Judging the Effectiveness of Interventions. Newly qualified practitioners acknowledged the difficulties of evaluating their own practice (Henriksen, 2015) and used a variety of methods in an attempt to achieve this (quantitative; Hung et al., 2008, qualitative; Larsen, 2017b, and based on theoretically informed practice; Howells, 2017). Experienced practitioners judged the quality of their service delivery based on the feedback gained from their clients (the nature and quality of the relationship and their engagement with the process; Bull, 1995; Neff, 1990; Tod, 2008) and also discussed the need to add value (Gordon, 2014), especially when working as part of a multi-disciplinary team (Larsen, 2017b). However, experienced practitioners did express concerns about not having anything 'tangible' to offer (Tod, 2007), as well as the challenges of measuring 'impact' (Gordon, 2014).

Summary. In summary, the trainee practitioners reflected on: their attempts to integrate within sporting environments (primarily as a way of proving their worth as applied practitioners; Christensen & Aoyagi, 2014); adopting multiple roles within these environments (Collins et al., 2013); experiencing inauthenticity and incongruence (Holt & Strean, 2001), and feelings of self-doubt and pressure (Woodcock et al., 2008). Newly qualified practitioners also reflected on their experiences of self-doubt; related to their perceived level of competence (Cropley et al., 2007), but in contrast to the trainee practitioners, also chose to reflect on: their lack of contact time with athletes (Rowley et al., 2012); the importance of practitioner self-care (Jackson, 2006); conflicts between self-promotion and sound ethical practice (Lindsay & Thomas, 2014); and becoming more aware of the connection between their beliefs and their applied approach (McGregor & Winter,

2017). The experienced practitioners were able to reflect on themselves (developing a congruent professional identity; Andersen, 2014), but also chose to discuss how they as individuals were able to effectively integrate within the culture in which they were situated to support the needs of both individuals and organisations (Brooks, 2007; Fifer et al., 2008; Tod, 2014).

Discussion

The research team synthesized the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners with the aim of highlighting common themes that provide focus to applied practitioners' reflective practice. By achieving this aim, we offer readers an insight into current progress on reflective content in applied sport psychology. The results add to existing knowledge in two distinct, but interconnecting ways. By synthesizing the reflective accounts, we are able to highlight what applied sport psychology practitioners, at different stages of development, chose to reflect on based on their own experiences, challenges, and developmental journeys. Furthermore, through this synthesis, we have been able to collate the reflective accounts of applied practitioners in one place, which allows us to make practical implications and offers readers the opportunity to engage in meta-reflection on the themes presented.

Our analysis of the reflective accounts suggests that the experiences applied practitioners choose to reflect on, vary dependent on the experience level of the practitioner themselves. The developmental journeys of sport psychologists have been found to be similar to that of counselling psychologists (Carlsson, 2012; McEwan & Tod, 2015; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Worthington, 1987) and our findings support this. For example, theories of practitioner development (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013) suggest optimal practitioner development involves the integration of the personal self with the professional self. Based on the trainee practitioners' reflective accounts, we theorised, through their consistent focus on

anxiety, self-doubt, and feelings of inauthenticity, that these individuals had not yet established a congruent philosophy of practice (Holt & Strean, 2001). The neophyte practitioners were beginning to achieve higher levels of awareness and consistency between their values, beliefs, and behaviour by demonstrating, and discussing, a closer connection between their applied practice and relevant psychological theory (Henrikson, 2015) and by reflecting on how their values aligned to their behaviours (McGregor & Winter, 2017). The experienced practitioners discussed their professional identity as an alignment between person and professional, which allowed them to engage freely and naturally within their environment and demonstrate authenticity and congruence (Lindsay, 2017). These findings are consistent with the practitioner development literature and the process of practitioner individuation (McEwan et al, 2019; Ronnestad & Skovholt, 2013; Wadsworth et al., 2021).

By understanding *what* applied practitioners, at different stages of development, choose to reflect on, we have the opportunity to offer practical implications based on practitioners' unique developmental needs. For example, our analysis suggests that, as well as reflecting on different topics, applied practitioners also engage in the process of reflective practice at different reflective levels (Anderson et al., 2004). Knowles and Gilbourne (2010) have suggested that reflective practice can occur at three distinct levels: technically (was that intervention effective?); practically (am I too emotionally involved with this client?); and critically (what does this experience mean in relation to the broader culture and context?). While these levels should not be viewed hierarchically, based on our earlier conceptualisation of reflective practice (understanding self within the context of practice; Knowles et al., 2014), applied practitioners may need to reflect at all three levels to facilitate an understanding of how they as individuals fit into their social and cultural context. Knowles and Gilbourne (2010) suggest that engaging in reflective practice at a critical level can be particularly useful for practitioners who are currently engaged in, or coming towards the end of, their formal

training. However, we concluded that the trainee practitioners consistently reflected at a technical or practical level (usually linked to concerns about their effectiveness or competency; Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010). To engage in reflective practice at a critical level, an individual must first understand themselves (and their experiences) before they can understand the significance of their experiences in relation to the wider context. Trainee practitioners did not demonstrate the ability to reflect on the connection between their experiences (and associated feelings) and the development of a professional identity and philosophy (Collins & McCann, 2015), preventing them from situating their experiences within their social and cultural context. Our review, alongside the increase in published reflective accounts, could be used as a frame of reference for trainee practitioners to critically reflect on, and understand, what their applied experiences might mean in relation to their context and the wider discipline. For example, instead of reflecting on how feelings of self-doubt potentially lead to ineffective service delivery, trainee practitioners could ask the question ‘what is it about this environment that is causing these feelings of pressure and inauthenticity?’. Education providers (academic institutions/professional bodies, and supervisors etc.) could also encourage trainee practitioners to engage in reflection as part of contemplative practice, which has been shown to reduce initial consultation anxiety in counselling practitioners (Cigrand, 2020) and may also reduce the sense of incongruence/inauthenticity trainee practitioners experience, facilitating reflection at all three reflective levels (Knowles & Gilbourne, 2010).

Our review also provides an insight into current progress on reflective content in applied sport psychology and may present practitioners with the opportunity to engage in meta-reflection (reflecting on reflections). By presenting common themes and experiences of applied practitioners, readers can reflect on how their own experiences match the themes presented here to facilitate their on-going development as practitioners (Huntley et al., 2014).

This may be particularly important for the newly qualified practitioners, who have successfully demonstrated that they can meet all of the competencies and expectations of their respective training pathways, but still have a significant amount to learn on their developmental journey to becoming experienced practitioners (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2013). Our findings suggest that newly qualified practitioners consistently reflected upon engaging with 'critical friends' following accreditation. By engaging with applied practitioners at a similar stage of development, newly qualified practitioners would be able to continuously engage in reflective practice (and meta-reflection) to facilitate their development and their transition into applied practice following supervised training.

We chose thematic content analysis as the method of analysis for this systematic review because it provided us with a method to synthesize the reflective accounts and achieve the aim of the research. We created themes from the literature, which represented the unique experiences of practitioners in different stages of development. Building on this, future work could adopt other forms of qualitative inquiry, such as a narrative analysis, to add extra layers of understanding and interpretation to reflective accounts. For example, by focusing on how applied practitioners are telling their story and representing themselves within their own narrative (via narrative analysis), a more in-depth critical insight into their developmental journey could be captured. Narrative analysis would allow us to shift between the narrative (how is the story being told?) and the product of the story (what is being said?) to better understand the reflective accounts of applied practitioners (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Also, our review predominantly highlighted the reflective experiences of sport psychology practitioners who are from, and work in, the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) (Henrich, et al., 2010) societies. Critically, to fully advance our knowledge base and to develop CPD and training of global value there is a need to embrace diversity and inclusivity (Shore et al., 2011). By only including papers written in

English, the majority of the accounts were from the United Kingdom and America, reducing the international scope of the research. Including cross cultural collaboration may allow a larger variety of reflective accounts written in languages other than English to be included. Including cross cultural research would provide even more insight into the applied experiences from practitioners situated in different cultures/countries and allow the voices of those sport psychologists in and from non-western societies to be heard and their development charted.

In this systematic review we have collated, and synthesized, the reflective accounts of applied sport psychology practitioners. Our findings add to existing knowledge by highlighting what applied sport psychology practitioners, at different stages of development, choose to reflect on from their applied experiences. Our findings demonstrate that applied practitioners, at different stages of development, differ in the topics they choose to discuss and how they engage in the reflective process itself. This review can be used as a frame of reference to help support applied practitioners' continued development, by encouraging engagement in reflective practice at all three reflective levels (technical, practical, and critical) and by facilitating the process of meta-reflection. If practitioners can understand how their own experiences relate to the experiences of other practitioners, they can gain further insight into the meaning behind their own applied experiences and begin to situate their experiences within the discipline as a whole.

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