An Existential-Humanistic Perspective on Elite Athlete Lifestyle Support

Abstract

This study aims to highlight how an existential-humanistic perspective can inform athlete support and in doing so, emphasise the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of athlete lifestyle support. Drawing on applied experience with elite youth cricketers over a twelve-month period, ethnographic data was collected through the observation, maintenance of case notes and a practitioner reflective diary. Based on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we created three non-fictional vignettes that we use to illustrate how existential-humanistic theorising can inform lifestyle support. We discuss the implications of this professional philosophy in terms of considerations for performance and talent development programmes and how holistic support for athletes is positioned. We also discuss implications for athlete lifestyle and performance psychology practitioners, with regard to training, underpinning theoretical grounding of support and the strategic positioning of their practitioner roles.

Keywords: sport psychology, lifestyle, applied, philosophy of practice, autoethnography

An Existential-Humanistic Perspective on Elite Athlete Lifestyle Support

The field of sport psychology has endured ongoing debate regarding the role and responsibilities of applied practitioners (see Anderson, 2009; Brady & Maynard, 2010). The debate has focused on the degree to which sport psychologists have an exclusive responsibility to enhance performance, or whether there ought to be a broader remit to ensure that athlete wellbeing and personal development are catered for through carrying out more of a 'caring' role (Friesen & Orlick, 2010; Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006, Kerr, Stirling & Macpherson, 2017). Some authors have suggested that these two agendas need not be dichotomised and in fact, can go hand in hand with mental skills training and counselling approaches applied in harmony (Corlett, 1996a; Ravizza, 2002; Nesti, 2010). The assumption of a more inclusive approach to athlete support is based on the argument that there is no such thing as a non-performance element of holistic athlete support.

Alongside this debate, athlete lifestyle programmes and the role of lifestyle practitioners who deliver them have been developed within the athlete support infrastructure. This development was initially in response to research findings of elite athletes struggling to come to terms with athletic retirement (for a review, see Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). One early example in the USA, the Career Assistance Programme for Athletes (CAPA) (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain & Murphy, 1992) aimed to introduce athletes to retirement concerns early in their career in order to alleviate the anxiety regarding their future after professional sport and thus prepare them for a smoother transition during retirement. Later programmes included but were not limited to the United States Olympic Education Centre (USOEC) and the Australian Athlete Career and Education (ACE) programme. Today, the England Institute of Sport (EIS) delivers the Performance Lifestyle programme to Olympic sports and some professional sports in the UK. Other professional sporting bodies have also developed

similarly aligned support services. These include the England and Wales Cricket Board's Personal Development and Welfare Programme.

Despite the growth of applied athlete lifestyle programme, there remains a lack of academic literature which has explicitly focused on the nature of support provided by lifestyle programmes. Stambulova and Ryba (2014) acknowledged that there is great diversity in the "more than 60" (lifestyle or similar) programmes that they identified worldwide (p. 7). Almost all of these programmes adopt "preventative/educational, 'whole career', 'whole person', and ecological perspectives" to athlete welfare. They suggest that sport psychology personnel deliver these programmes with a primary focus on providing education, guidance and skills to help athletes prepare for life after sport and to manage demands outside of their sport. More recently, Stambulova et al. (2020) cited Torregrossa, Regüela, and Mateos' (2020) taxonomy of CAPs as

> Consisting of holistic CAPs for elite athletes focusing on sport, education, work, and personal growth, sport specific CAPs for professional athletes helping with business, legal, financial and mental health issues, and dual career CAPs for student-athletes facilitating their sport-study combination" (Stambulova et al. 2020, p-6)

There have been various accounts of what lifestyle support should look like (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014; Stambulova et al., 2020; Wylleman, Alferman & Lavallee, 2004), yet, there is a paucity of literature to describe what practitioners actually do in practice. The ECB's Personal Development and Welfare Programme is officially described as providing "integrated, impartial support to players and the team environment, to develop resilience in and out of cricket as a personalized service within the three areas of wellbeing, lifestyle and personal development" (ECB, 2017; also see EIS, 2017). This appears to promote a more immersed, relational, psychologically informed and performance-oriented

provision of support than is described in the academic literature. Moreover, across institutions, lifestyle support is not necessarily the exclusive preserve of the sport psychologist but might be facilitated and/or delivered by a practitioner who might have education, training or experience in a non-sport or non-psychology related field, for example, career advisors or former athletes (Devaney, 2019; Torregrossa et al., 2020). Despite the diversity that exists across sporting organisations and practitioners, the most relevant guiding literature for lifestyle support has been carried out from a sport psychology perspective. This confusion has created a lack of role clarity for both lifestyle practitioners and the sport psychology practitioners regarding the specific support they are required to provide. It appears that ambiguity and potential confusion exists with regards to how athlete lifestyle practitioners actually support athletes and what their purpose as part of a multi-disciplinary team is (Devaney et al., 2018).

The ambiguity and confusion is not helped by the lack of explicit lifestyle-focused research. It could be argued that these shortcomings are the result of the lack of gravity afforded to lifestyle concerns. As a result, 'lifestyle' concerns have often been broadly categorised as off-field personal factors (Dorfmann, 1990), personal issues that interfere with performance (Ravizza, 1990), or issues of a more general nature related to athlete wellbeing (Poczwardowski, Sherman, & Ravizza, 2004). Relying on broad descriptions makes it difficult to theorise the issues at hand, and understand the nature of support which is required. This leaves lifestyle practitioners with minimal academic grounding and guidance for their work in the field. However, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, Priestley (2008) provided some guidance, suggesting that lifestyle programmes would be found wanting if they continued to rely on a culture of workshop delivery as opposed to the earning and building of trusting relationships. He highlighted the potential value of lifestyle practitioners embracing more ongoing and long-term, practitioner-focused and counselling psychology-based

approaches as a grounded framework from which to support the lifestyle-based needs of athletes.

The lack of insight into how athlete lifestyle practitioners support athletes combined with the potential overlap and/or confusion with the role of performance psychologists, as well as the need for theoretical grounding of lifestyle support, has created an opportunity for knowledge advancement. This ethnographic study aims to start filling these gaps in the literature and draws on the 1st author's applied experiences of working as a lifestyle practitioner with elite youth cricketers in a national talent development programme. These experiences allow for the theorising of players' concerns and an understanding of how support was provided whilst drawing upon an existential-humanistic approach. An existential-humanistic approach aligns with Priestley's (2008) call for long-term, practitioner-focused counselling psychology-based approaches; furthermore, it emphasises meaning, values, responsibility and situated freedom which aligns with the recommendation of Stambulova and Ryba (2014) and Torregrossa et al. (2020) to adopt a whole person approach to athlete support that embraces personal growth.

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first to theorise lifestyle support provision and highlights the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of this work. In our previous study (reference masked) we identified the lifestyle concerns that the youth cricketers sought support for. The objective of this study was to analyse the first author's applied experiences to theorise the lifestyle support within an existential-humanistic framework. It is hoped that this account can offer practitioners in the field insight as to how an existential-humanistic perspective can effectively underpin the support provision of an athlete lifestyle practitioner. In doing so, this research also aims to highlight the importance of lifestyle practitioners having a philosophical underpinning for the support they provide.

Methodology

Existential-humanistic approach: basic assumptions

An existential approach is based on a human science conception of psychology that is focused on understanding the meaning assigned to the 'lived experience' (Giorgi, 1970) as opposed to natural scientific perspectives which have been criticised for reducing human beings to functional machines (Cooper, 2003). Cooper (2003) outlined how existentialist thinkers embrace the uniqueness and complexity of each human life as it is lived and maintain that human beings are more than a sum of their components. Existential thought generally subscribes to ontological realism; an assumption that there is a reality that is independent of our perspectives on it (Cooper, 2003). Therefore, existential psychology differs from social constructionist approaches which have become more visible in sport psychology and which generally subscribe to ontological relativism. However, an existential epistemology aligns with constructivism in asserting that our knowledge is always situated and partial (Richert, 2010). In contrast to an idea of a fixed inner core, Kierkegaard (1849/1983, p. 13) articulated the existential, anti-essentialist notion of the self as "a relation that relates itself to itself", thus suggesting that the self does not lie in a fixed entity, but in the changing, complex and reflexive relationship that human beings have with their being (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Essentially, human beings are 'thrown' into an existence in the world that is not of their choice, but are in possession of agency and are therefore not determined or totally constituted by their external conditions and culture (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017).

Yalom (1980) suggested that the human condition is characterised by four "givens": death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Through acknowledging that we are on a unique journey towards death, we become responsible for our lives and decisions (Cooper, 2003). This responsibility highlights the importance of making choices and taking actions

which are authentic. That is, we are called to make conscious decisions knowing that we are finite beings and by choosing one option we simultaneously abandon other possibilities. Existential psychologists discuss freedom in the sense that human beings are responsible for their own world. Freedom implies a great responsibility on the individual to make choices and take action, a responsibility which leads to normal (existential) anxiety (May, 1983). Isolation as a given refers to the fact that although we can form close relationships, each of us is always alone in their reflective consciousness. Finally, existential psychologists maintain that the search for meaning is a fundamental motive in human life. Our being is an issue for us (Heidegger, 1962), and we are thrown into the world to look for meaning in what some existential psychologists see as an inherently meaningless world (Yalom, 1980). However, not all existential psychologists conceive meaning as something to be simply created (from nowhere), but rather as something hidden but already there to be discovered (Frankl, 1963).

Existential psychology is founded on the grounding assumption that the fundamental aim of psychology is to understand and embrace the complexities of human life, not to fix or conquer it (van Deurzen, 2002). Nesti and Ronkainen (2020) described this work in sport as helping athletes to clarify what they are struggling with, identifying sources of meaning, authentic goals and values, helping athletes make conscious decisions and accepting responsibility for one's career life trajectory and relationships.

An Ethnographic research approach

The current study adopted an ethnographic approach to the research process. According to Peters, McAllister and Rubinstein (2001), the primary strength of an ethnography is its holistic approach and respect for the empirical world – that is, the everyday lived experience of people. They highlighted how this creates the potential for developing knowledge of human life and activities in their naturally occurring settings. Atkinson and Hammersley (1998, p. 110) outlined the following generic features of ethnographic research:

(1) A strong emphasis on exploring the nature of the particular social phenomenon, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them

(2) A tendency to work primarily with unstructured data (i.e., that have not been coded at the point of collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories)

(3) Investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one, in detail

(4) Analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which usually takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at best

It is important to acknowledge, that the study also embraced elements of autoethnography, in that my (1st author's) practitioner reflections on providing support were important in answering the research question. Autoethnography, the study of one's own culture and oneself as part of that culture, allows researchers to use their own experiences to garner insights into the larger culture or sub-culture that they are a part of (Patton, 2015).

The participants

The talent development programme we examined consisted of two squads of players between the age of 15 and 19 who had been selected as players with the highest potential nationally within their respective skill areas. The participants in the study were members of one of these squads. At the beginning of the research, there were 16 players in the squad, 12 of whom were on their second year on the programme, and four were in their first year. After nine months, four players were deselected from the match playing squad, and four new players joined the programme. As such, members of the setting over the course of the research included 20 players selected from their First Class Counties (professional clubs playing the national domestic game who are awarded First Class status). Membership of the

programme involved attendance at residential domestic training camps, overseas competitive and non-competitive tours and home competitive tours. Of the 20 players involved in this study, 16 were in full-time secondary education throughout data collection.

The researcher

Foley (2002) suggested that if the researcher is to produce a more defensible interpretation of their fieldwork then there is a requirement to explore the "self" and the "other" relationship. This is particularly important within the current study given the co-creation of findings from within the practitioner-client relationship. At this juncture, it is also appropriate to share here the biographical information that formed the first author's perceptual lens.

I (the first author) worked as a personal development and welfare (PDW) coach with a national cricket talent development programme, supporting male cricketers under the age of 19 over a four year period. The Personal Development and Welfare role delivers the England and Wales Cricket board's athlete lifestyle programme. Given the wide variety of backgrounds from which lifestyle practitioners appear to enter the field, it is important to state my training background and approach to supporting players. I have completed a BSc in Psychology and an MSc in Sport Psychology. As a result, I was effectively a trainee sport psychologist carrying out the role of athlete lifestyle practitioner. My philosophy of practice assumes a holistic counselling approach and is based on the existential-humanistic approach outlined previously. This professional philosophy recognises my belief in developing a meaningful relationship with those with whom I work with first and foremost and the value I place on rigorous personal examination and improved knowledge of self (Corlett, 1996a). Throughout the manuscript, the use of "I", "me" or "my" will refer to the first author, whilst "we" will denote the research team.

Data collection

Data was collected over twelve months carrying out the role of PDW coach within a national cricket talent development programme. This twelve-month period included attendance and delivery at 10 training camps, one three-week overseas tour and one three-week home tour with occasional support delivered away from these structured programme periods, for example, when players were at home or school, or during the domestic cricket season. Data collection involved observation, the maintenance of player case notes that attempted to capture (as best possible) the conversations, challenges discussed, and interventions delivered in supporting players. The first author also kept a diary of practitioner reflections and discussed his thoughts and ideas throughout the process with the research team. These reflections allowed the authors to explore different interpretations of the events and experiences, and make theoretical links from the data to the existential-humanistic perspective. The novel approach to this study, using the first author's applied experiences meant that the maintenance of a reflective diary and the contributions of critical friends (Sparkes & Smith, 2002) held great value. This process allowed the research team to develop reflexivity (Brewer, 2000; Day, 2012), and, acknowledge, challenge and understand the first author's practitioner-researcher role. It was decided that data collection should follow ethnographic guidelines of notes never (normally) being written up more than 24 hours after the original engagement (Krane & Baird, 2005). These entries were then supplemented by practitioner reflective diary entries, during which I could attempt to make sense of my interactions with players and staff (Krane & Baird, 2005).

Data analysis and representation

A thematic analysis was carried out in alignment with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance. We recognise that Braun and Clarke have subsequently developed their approach to thematic analysis, most recently by describing it as reflexive thematic analysis embedded within the so-called 'big Q' qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). However, we have

used their early framing of thematic analysis because it was conceived as "essentially independent of theory and epistemology" (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as opposed to their later versions of thematic analysis which they have described as incompatible with research drawing on realist ontological position (which informs this study). In drawing on the guidelines from their 2006 article, the steps of our analysis included (1) Familiarisation through repeated reading of the data whilst searching for meaning and patterns amongst the data, (2) Generating initial codes and organising data into meaningful groups, (3) Sorting different codes into potential themes and collating extracts from the data into themed groups, (4) Reviewing themes in line with Patton's (1990) dual criteria of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, (5) Defining and naming the themes before (6) being prepared to use data extracts to prepare the report. This allowed us to recognise those challenges which appeared most common and most pertinent to the lives of these players during significant moments of the first authors applied one-to-one support. These moments allowed for insight into the broad range of support provided, whilst also providing examples of how an existential-humanistic perspective informed athlete lifestyle support.

The finding are represented as composite vignettes, (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997; Spalding & Phillips, 2007). The vignettes are used to convey the situations that the first author encountered within his applied work. They are presented as one player's experience of seeking out and engaging with support whilst recognising that as a composite character, this representation actually highlights the shared experience of several players. The vignettes are presented to illustrate how an existential-humanistic framework, and its associated concepts, informed how the first author made sense of the athlete's situatons, what their support needs where and how he used this to guide his work with the athletes. Vignette one is a case study of a player's challenges as they were encountered over a series of interactions. This case study symbolizes what emerged as a boundary situation (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) for most

of the young players I worked with. The case study allows the player's whole situation as identified through observations and conversations with him and his coaches, to be appreciated by the reader. For vignettes two and three, individual dialogue extracts were created from real conversations with players, include player's own words and are presented as moments of applied work that offer insight into some of the more specific challenges that players sought support for. These vignettes are theorised drawing on existential-humanistic perspectives that are consistent with the first author's philosophy of practice. The vignettes are therefore presented as authentic recollections of the applied support provided, as captured within the case notes and practitioner reflections based on my work with players. The creation of composite vignettes allowed for deeply personal moments of player experiences and applied support to be presented. Further, it allowed for the protection of participant's ethical right for anonymity whilst maintaining a commitment to representing their words as well as experiences and their meaning as accurately as possible (Ronkainen, Sleeman & Richardson, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics can be a complicated subject when conducting ethnographic research (Goodwin, Pope, Mort & Smith, 2003; Ferdinand, Pearson. Rowe & Worthington, 2007), and this is especially the case when blending practice and research as in the current study. As a first step, the research reported here was approved by the University ethics committee. The Talent Development programme manager, and the first author's line manager (and national lead for the discipline), were both identified as gatekeepers who could provide access to the research environment, and provide consent for overt research within the environment. Research access was further facilitated by the researcher's entry to the program as a new practitioner within the staff team. All members of the setting (players and staff), were provided with a verbal briefing of the practitioner's role, the aims of the research and the data

collection procedures. All participants were offered assurances regarding anonymity and that they could opt-out and withdraw from the research at any time (no participants opted to do so). All players within this study have been anonymised, and anonymity has also been reinforced by the creation of composite characters blending several participants' experiences within the results. It was also felt that good ethical practice as a practitioner in the setting did not compromise, and in fact, enhanced good ethical practice as a researcher, as both demand responsibility for non-judgemental regard and support and a primary focus on player welfare and confidentiality.

Results

"I just don't know what I am going to do!"

Paul has been a part of the England development programme for three years, making the progression from the National Under-17 squad to the Under-19 squad. This progression can be seen as recognition of his positive development by the coaches. In addition, he was selected for the Under-19 world cup during his third year. In describing his abilities, a coach suggested that he is an "outstanding character to have in the team, he is a very good bowler and a very good batsmen. Unfortunately, he is not world-class at either of the two so he sometimes does not get the recognition he deserves." The player came to me faced with a lot of uncertainty regarding his future. He is in the final year of his county academy contract, meaning he will either get a county professional contract or be released. He has enjoyed mixed success when representing his county second team, and he says he feels he has played quite well for the National under-19 side. However, the topic of his contract has so far been completely avoided by the County. Thus, he is very unsure of his future. He is due to finish secondary education and is contemplating university, however, he is unsure if

he'd suit the university way of life, and is worried about having enough opportunities for cricket development to continue into a professional career. If he does get a professional contract, he is unsure whether or not the coaches would welcome his pursuit of a university place. Unsurprisingly, he is finding it difficult to focus on either his education, in the run up to his exams, or playing cricket at a crucial stage in his cricket career. He is anxious about how to approach the summer and the decisions which have yet to be made."

The first thing that struck me about Paul's case was the sheer complexity involved at this decisive stage of his career. This included consideration of cultural norms and expectations regarding cricketers going to University, coach relationships, expectations of what Paul was required to do to 'earn' a contract, making educational decisions and the ongoing pressure to perform. Existential psychology provided me with an alternative view of Paul's anxiety, one that was concerned with Paul's possibilities and limitations rather than representing an unpleasant pre-competition emotion. Much of the literature discussing anxiety in sport has focused on competitive anxiety (Mellalieu, Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Ford, Ildefonso, Jones & Arvinen-Barrow, 2017), the intensity of the emotion and whether it is facilitative or debilitative (Jones, Hanton & Swain, 1994). These descriptions of anxiety in sport do not account for the complexity and meaning of Paul's experience, and ultimately fail to look beyond the behaviourist or cognitive approaches to anxiety. I found out that Paul's anxiety was not so much related to his ability to perform, which he felt positive about, rather, it was a result of the uncertainty of his situation. That is, the potential for him to lose his status and identity as a county cricketer.

I felt that Paul was faced with a difficult situation and an urgent need to decide a course of action and take responsibility for those actions. I also felt that I had established a strong relationship with him throughout the previous six months. During two prolonged one-to-one

sessions, I believed that my role was to help him make sense of the challenges he was facing, and the meaning behind his anxiety, mainly, the major transitions facing him within the next few months and the uncertainty over his future. During the sessions, the player began to recognise some of the factors which he could take action on and began to plan for them with a greater sense of situational awarneess, such as establishing targets with his coach and speaking to the University cricket programme coach. However, it seemed that the primary impact of our encounters for the player was in recognising the meaning behind his anxieties and that he would need the courage to face up to these over the coming months if he was going to earn a contract and achieve his goals. May (1989) recognised this as being central to the counselling process in helping professions, suggesting the counselee should leave feeling more courageous, yet also very aware of the challenges/difficulties that lay ahead.

"I don't know if I can stay here, but, what would the coaches think of me?"

Me*:* *So, how have things been going for you?*

Mark*:* *Not that great to be honest. I was quite nervous about boarding school, mostly because I had struggled so much away from home on tour last year. I have found it really tough to be honest.*

Me*:* *Can you tell me a bit more about that?*

Mark*:* *The difference in schools is just crazy. I was at a state school before, and the expectations of people now are so different. I am not sure I really fit in there or am cut out for boarding at all to be honest. I changed because it is a great school, it is better logistically for everything really in terms of being able to get to my county ground, and I guess it is also a good training environment for my cricket. But I have been missing home a lot and I have not really settled there.*

Me*:* *How does that feel?*

Mark*:* *It's quite lonely, I miss my friends, and family from home a lot, but also I feel like I don't really get along with the new people. Also for the first term, I don't have any cricket as it only starts after Christmas, so that has made it harder to fit in. This week is the first bit of time off I have had, and I have to spend all of it here on training camp, except for one afternoon at home. Because of that, I am finding it really hard to be here (on a training camp).*

Me*:* *I can see that must be quite tough for you. Have you tried to speak to the school to see if you could go home during time off more regularly?*

Mark*:* *Well, because of county cricket training at weekends, I am already using up most of my time off. I think I need to go home before the end of this camp because otherwise, I will not get home for a period of three months.*

Me*:* *Is that what you want to do?*

Mark*:* *I don't know. Last year, when I was really struggling on tour with homesickness, I discussed it with the (previous) PDW that I needed to pre-empt any challenges, and start to get support or help before it became a big issue. I kind of feel that that's what I am doing now. I feel I might really begin to struggle when I go back to school if I don't get time at home now. But I don't know what the coaches will think? It's not really a normal thing to do, to come to an England camp, and not want to be here. I just don't think the coaches would think too much of me if I did leave.*

Me*:* *That is a very difficult situation? So where do we need to go from here?*

Mark*:* *I am not sure, I think I should see how I feel tomorrow morning and decide then, but maybe it would be good if you spoke to the head coach, to see what he thinks about the idea.*

Mark had spent a large part of the previous season injured. He had then received a scholarship at an elite cricketing school that required him to leave home and begin boarding. He was also faced with a change of school which has challenged his identity and his ability to adapt. This has left the player feeling emotionally drained, and not particularly motivated at the prospect of his time on camp. The coaches had already observed his lack of engagement and some emotional outbursts from the player, which had drawn some criticism.

Drawing on my understanding of the existential counselling approach, with a focus on freedom of choice and ultimate responsibility for the athlete (Ravizza, 2002). I felt that my role was to remain non-judgemental and help Mark establish what was in his best interests whilst challenging him to understand his feelings. It was important to me that any solution to the problem came from Mark himself. In this sense, my approach was similar to that outlined by Henriksen, Diment and Hansen (2011) who stated that "elite athletes are motivated and learn better when they are allowed to think and take responsibility for their own development" (p. 8).

The following morning the player approached me leading to the following brief interaction:

Me*:* *I have spoken with the head coach, and he has remained discreet. He is happy for us to decide whatever we think is best for you. Have you had more time to think about it?*

Mark*:* *I think I need to stay. It will be hard, but I think I need to show that I can do it. I think I will let down my teammates and coaches if I do not stay, and I*

think I need to show myself that I can do it, if I am to keep doing it for the rest of the winter.

Me: *Ok, I think that is great. I am here to help if you begin to find it tough during the rest of the week, and when you are back at school, do not hesitate to come to me.*

Mark was faced with a challenging situation, which could have led to him leaving the camp and presenting what he felt would be an unfavourable image of himself. Ultimately, my interpretation was that he needed to become more comfortable with his growing independence, within a short period of time in order to balance his commitments and busy schedule. He decided, to accept the uncomfortable moments that this created, understanding the commitment that was required of him, and face the challenges with my support.

In critique of the existing literature on transitions, Nesti and Littlewood (2011) suggested that the term transitions could be too easily interpreted as something that is rather smooth, steady and relatively easy to negotiate. They suggested that a more dramatic and appropriate term to describe these situations for athletes is critical moments. In this sense, it was not so much the transition itself, but the critical moments, viewed within the context of these broader transitions that required a response from the player. Critical moments could "range from something to nothing, could be large or small, intended or unintended and may have a negative or positive effect on a person's sense of self (self-awareness and self-knowledge)" (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank & Richardson, 2012, p. 25). In other words, they are the frequently experienced moments in our lives where we must confront the anxiety associated with an important change in our identity. Interestingly, Schlossberg's (1981) early conceptualisation of transition, which was a dominant feature of early athlete transition literature (Alfermann & Gross, 1997) and still remains well-cited, discussed the

transformation of the self in relation to transitions. However, sport psychologists appear to have largely ignored this existential dimension of her model, focusing more on coping resources and barriers related to the broader and more predictable transitions.

According to an existential perspective, critical moments will always involve existential anxiety (Nesti et al., 2012). Mark's anxiety is not simply the result of the impending need to perform. Like Paul, it is a result of the uncertainty of his current situation, as well as his responsibility and freedom to act. Existential psychologists contend that there is a danger in individuals attempting to avoid or remove this normal anxiety by living as though we have no influence over whom or what we will become. From this perspective, we may view anxiety as a positive thing, an indication that we value some future enough that we are ready to commit to it, despite the uncomfortable uncertainty (Nesti & Ronkainen, 2020). Whilst Mark and Paul accepted the feelings of discomfort, it was suggested that these feelings when embraced through greater understanding can lead to positive outcomes of individual growth (Ravizza, 2002) and "courage" development (see Corlett, 1996b).

The challenges discussed by Mark and Paul involved a combination of life within and outside of cricket, suggesting that treating these two as completely separate would be to the detriment of the support provided. Instead, these discussions related heavily to the players' sporting life and how this fits in with who they are and who they wanted to become. The encounters I had with these players appear to reinforce the value of practitioners recognising the whole person, and not just the athlete (Ravizza, 2002) whilst suggesting that discriminating between performance and non-performance factors may be misguided.

"*If I am going to improve, they need to know where I am coming from!"*

Me*:* *Hi Terry, how are you doing?*

Terry*:* *Yeah, mostly ok. Been working hard and been hitting it well; there have just been one or two things I have struggled with. I have always played the game*

a certain way, very attacking. I tend to take on a lot of big shots, which when it's good it's great, when it goes wrong, your gone. The coaches want me to change the way I play, which means taking fewer risks. But to me it feels so unnatural, it's like, I have to really think to play the game that way, which causes me to make mistakes. I am at my best when it's just natural and I keep it simple. I can see why the coaches want me to become safer, but I just feel like it changes all of the good things I have to offer.

Me: *Have you spoken to the coaches about it?*

Terry: *Well that's the thing, I don't really know if I can? So I thought I should ask you about it first? I don't want to seem like I am being arrogant and just saying I don't want their advice, but at the moment I feel it's making things more complicated. What do you think?*

Me: *What makes you think that you cannot speak to them about it?*

Terry: *Well it could seem like I am questioning them, or not showing them respect. I feel like I need to make them think I am improving, and to them, making this change would be improving... or else they won't keep picking me. I get on really well with the coaches, so I want to keep that but I also want to feel better about my batting. So I don't really know what to do?*

Me: *Well, I would ask why you are here. What are you trying to get from being here?*

Terry: *Well I am here to improve and eventually play for England. Right now I am here to get better as a player, but I am not sure I am at the moment. So do you think I should speak to the coaches, I am afraid they won't appreciate it?*

Me*:* *Well to me, it seems like this current situation is not really good for either of you. Both you and the coaches want to see improvements. What's your view? Which of the coaches might you feel most comfortable speaking to?*

Terry*:* *I think they need to know why I am struggling. I need to help them understand why I find it tough to change. If I do maybe they can help, or we can work on it together. I think I could speak to Bob, I get on well with him, but it will still be quite difficult to do, and let him know what I am thinking. If I am going to improve, they need to know where I am coming from. Thanks for speaking to me about this.*

Me: *No problem, if you want we can have another chat before you do speak to Bob, and we can plan what you want to say to him?*

The final vignette highlights the interpersonal and integrated nature of working within a performance environment and the position I assumed when remaining non-judgemental and confidential to support players. Given the recognition that coaches are one of the most important actors within a youth sport context (Camire, Forneris, Trudel & Bernard, 2011) and also play a crucial role in determining players' future opportunities in the sport, it is no surprise that maintaining a positive relationship with their coaches is thought to be highly important for players. However, like Terry, players could be left wondering who they need to keep happy, and confused by what could appear to be conflicting messages. The want of players to keep others happy appeared to present a risk to players as they struggled to maintain a sense of personal authenticity (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). This could place their identity in a state of confusion (Richardson, Relvas & Littlewood 2013) and negatively influence their ability to take responsibility for their own development and future. The influence of the performance environment, and the key stakeholders within it on Terry's sense of self, meant that he preferred to have a somewhat impartial practitioner to speak to during the challenging moment.

Informed by existential thought and the existential perspective on counselling, I felt that I had been recognised as that person whose interests lie with Terry's needs, rather than any form of selection criteria or performance agenda. Nonetheless my work was likely to have a performance impact, making this support in no way redundant from the performance goals of the team. The added benefit is that through being immersed within the staff team, I could understand the context and prove an informative link to the staff, yet provide a non-judgemental and confidential source of support for the player. The concerns were not directly relating to performance, yet, I interpreted the primary goal of the work as seeking to improve coach-athlete relations, the player's ability to take responsibility for his development and ultimately, performance for the player.

Being empowered to perform this role depended on my immersion in the environment, as it requires developing trusting relationships with players and staff. In Richardson's (2003) doctoral research investigating the role of heads of education and welfare within football academies, he found that the practitioners continuously strived to drive, guide and implement an explicit player support agenda. My experiences align with this stance. Amidst the highly competitive, performance-driven environment of elite sport, the needs of the player can easily become a regrettable after-thought when more embedded consideration could have assisted the development of the player. Gaining trust and buy-in to perform this role required constantly promoting the synthesis of performance and welfare in the staff's efforts to help players deal with the demands.

Discussion

It seems pertinent to briefly discuss the nature of concerns that players shared as it adds contect to the primary research objective. The players presented concerns which related to decisions over whether or not they would get a professional contract, deciding whether or not to go to university, performance anxiety, homesickness, changing school, coach

relationships and issues regarding cricket performance and selection. Although players' concerns originated both in and out of cricket, the players considered these concerns to be vital to their performance and development within their life. However, previous literature within sport psychology has been dominated by a focus on the delivery of performance-focused mental skills training, drawing on a cognitive behavioural perspective. This dominance has come at a cost of not understanding the broader lives of the whole person and how this relates to performance; and of there existing limited discussion regarding how other approaches, for example, an existential-humanistic approach, can underpin effective support.

The concerns that players raised were deeply complex and I found that there was a requirement for a more meaningful understanding of the person and their context when compared with those described in much of the literature. The issues players raised in this study were also much more complex than being able to be resolved through the delivery of mental skills training, or the delivery of education and guidance. The concerns presented typically required consideration of the whole person, the social context of the concern and the player's negotiation of their identity. This incongruence between the focus of previous literature and athletes' actual experience of concerns is problematic for the training and development of lifestyle practitioners (and sport psychologists), who may remain unaware of the complexity of players' concerns in practice. It may also act as a barrier to getting holistic support higher on the agenda of organisations and their support infrastructures, ultimately limiting the development of athletes and negatively impacting performance.

The overarching research objective was to understand how an existential-humanistic perspective can inform the work of an athlete lifestyle practitioner. In his unpublished work, Priestley (2008) highlighted the importance of building and earning trusting relationships and the need for unconditional, non-judgemental, empathic, genuine and congruent support of players. He suggested that a person-centred approach to counselling could provide an

effective blueprint from which advisors could work and seek to develop professionally. These findings will add to this, by suggesting that an existential-humanistic perspective (Nesti, 2004) may provide an alternative approach that is, at times, more applicable given the nature of demands facing these young players. According to Nesti and Ronkainen (2020), the goal of the existential approach when supporting athletes is to help athletes clarify what they are struggling with and identify their sources of meaning, authentic goals and values, as opposed to uncritically fulfilling the team's or coach's aspirations and cultural norms. This does not equate to radical individualism, rather, the ability of players to make conscious decisions and take responsibility for their own career and development. Many of the elements described by Priestley (2008) remain important to this process. However, the existential approach suggests that whilst the "encounter" (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017) can be uncomfortable for the athlete, as embracing the responsibility to act is personally demanding, the normal anxiety associated with the concerns described by the players above can be viewed as a positive experience. This is not to say that the situation is simply reframed as a positive one, but that the normal anxiety indicates that the athlete values some potential version of their future. As a result, the challenge can lead to the development of a greater sense of self, commitment to pursuing a specific future, personal growth and courage.

In order to support athletes using an existential approach, an athlete lifestyle practitioner will require buy-in and trust from programme managers, requiring time and contextual immersion. Practitioners must also develop player's trust through demonstrating two qualities central to a humanistic and existential approach to counselling; remaining non-judgemental and maintaining confidentiality. This does not mean that information can never be shared between practitioner, player and other staff working with the player. For example, Bickley, Rogers, Bell and Thombs (2016) highlighted that developing a shared understanding of a player's challenges allows for more effective working as a staff team. However, finding

the balance between offering confidentiality to athletes and supporting the broader system of support staff in their understanding of player needs will require ethical consideration and appropriate contracting with the player.

Limitations

In this study, as in our previous research (reference masked), the practitioner and researcher roles were symbiotic in their dual-focus on athlete care and wellbeing but did create a sense of role conflict between an active practitioner and (a more) neutral researcher. The combination of practice and research does create ambiguity with regard to confidentiality and anonymity, thus requiring careful management of data and a limited presentation of the broader lives and backgrounds of participants. Representing participant stories from memory as opposed to audio recording was also a necessary limitation not to compromise the trust involved in performing the practitioner-researcher role. However, the practitioner-researcher approach was considered a major strength of this research as it provided a uniquely applied insight into the player's experiences. Having the role of the practitioner who was there to support the players rather than just gather observations facilitated the gathering of rich, emotional and honest insight into player's lives. The longitudinal nature of immersion also acted as a strength in terms of the depth of data accrued and researcher credibility, helping to advance understandings a relatively under-studied topic. Finally, although an existential-humanistic perspective was highlighted as highly valuable to underpin athlete lifestyle support, it is important to acknowledge that it is not the only perspective or lens, through which the support of players in this study could be viewed. However, it is believed to be an under-represented and valuable perspective upon which practitioners can base their work. Further, it is hoped that highlighting the value of a single perspective does highlight the responsibility that practitioners hold to ensure their work is underpinned by an appropriate theoretical grounding.

Implications

This study has theorised the psychological nature of athlete lifestyle concerns from an existential-humanistic perspective. It has been argued that this perspective can provide a sound theoretical grounding for effective lifestyle support and should, therefore, be a more prominent perspective within the literature when discussing the holistic support of athletes from either the perspective of athlete lifestyle or sport psychology support. The analysis has also highlighted the importance of explicating the philosophical underpinnings of lifestyle support provision. This raises two issues requiring consideration and further discussion within the industry of athlete lifestyle support. Firstly, do lifestyle practitioners assume a philosophy of practice in their work, and secondly, how does the lifestyle practitioner role relate to that of a sport psychologist given both roles will require a strong psychological underpinning and both roles will seek to provide holistic support for performance and wellbeing.

Although allowing for a wide range of skill sets within the lifestyle support industry, the diverse backgrounds from which lifestyle practitioners may originate (e.g., sport management, sport science, career support, teaching, ex-athlete) suggests that many of them may not have a psychologically informed philosophy of practice through which to ground their support of players. Perhaps as a result, there remains no literature discussing where practitioners do seek guidance for their work. This article presents a first attempt at illuminating one practitioner's theoretical grounding and guidance within their work. However, some of the content may come as a surprise to others, who have not shared the same developmental pathway as the first author, making it all the more important for others to share their theoretical grounding and where they turn to for professional guidance.

With regard to the relationship between lifestyle practitioners and sport psychologist, the findings of this study suggest that it would be ill-guided to consider "on-field" and "off-

field" issues as two separate areas to address in isolation. Instead, we suggest that issues away from sport require careful consideration of sporting elements of the players' broader lives, and vice versa. This dispels any notion of the issues being strictly either performance or non-performance in nature. This is important, as it suggests that truly holistic support of athletes by performance psychologists and lifestyle practitioners is not simply about dividing roles and responsibilities into performance and personal concerns, but about understanding the person and the meaning that they ascribe to their lived experiences. This suggests that the practitioner's philosophies of practice and the theoretical underpinnings of support provision will prove a better guide for practitioner support roles, than dividing or assigning roles and responsibilities. Otherwise, there may be a situation whereby athletes are not sure who they should speak to regarding their concerns, or, whereby certain athlete concerns are not being considered by either practitioner as a necessary element of the support they offer.

In order to ensure effective applied psychological support of the whole person, it is necessary to establish a strong relationship and interrelatedness between the support of the "on-field" and "off-field" regarless of support infrastructure. This relationship will need to built upon an understanding of player's whole lived experiences and the philosophical underpinnings of each practitioner's work and their skill sets. However, the important message for athletes and organisations is that there is a recognised need for the athlete to have access to a truly holistic support network/package in order to develop personally and as performers simultaneously and symbiotically. Organisations and programme managers need to strongly consider the dynamics of training backgrounds and philosophies of practice involved in the holistic support of athletes in order to help guide both recruitment and the training and/or development of practitioners.

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